



**GIFTING this
WONDERFUL
WORLD
with BLESSINGS!**

The
Female
Knight's
Lullaby

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この素晴らしい
世界に
祝福を!
12

女の騎士
うの
バイ



"I am Megumin. As you can tell, I am a Crimson Magic Clansman and Axel's number one magician."

"This is my cousin, Dustiness Ford Sylphina. Due to some circumstances, she's moved to this town."

"Hello, my name is Sylphina. Nice to meet you."

Megumin

Darkness

Sylphina




"First, I should report to the onee-san at the guild."

Then, I have to go to the Axis Cult Church, after which I'll head to the grocer..."

Aqua

**“Yes, I am lewd!
I’ve already made up my mind!
Tonight, I won’t let you sleep!”**

**“Do you want us to be
more than friends
but less than lovers?
Yes or No?”**



He taught me what it
meant to be broad-minded
enough to associate with
everyone. Having learned
that, I believe that I have
become a great politician."

"What we must
protect is not the
pride of nobility,
but those without
power."

Prologue

At the center of the adventurer's guild, a young girl who looked like Darkness innocently smiled.

"She really does look like Lalatina-chan! Hey little girl, could you tell me who your dad is!?"

A female adventurer who was drawn in by the girl's smile leaned on Darkness with a beer mug in hand.

"Agh, it's none of your business you drunks! Oi Kazuma, hurry up and do something about these people!"

Darkness, whose face was flushed red with either alcohol or embarrassment, turned to me for help...

"She's mine!"

"If you don't want me to beat you to death then shut it!"

Darkness quickly grabbed ahold of me as I raised a thumb at the inquiring female adventurer.

Witnessing the scene unfold, the young girl began to giggle.

The rowdy-looking people who surrounded her smiled, entranced to the point where I was worried they would be arrested by the police later.

"Hey Kazuma, isn't it about time we decide this time's V.I.P.!??"

"Don't you mean M.V.P.? Either way, isn't it obvious that it would be me!?"

After I rebutted Aqua, who seemed to be in a good mood, Megumin raised her voice, a triumphant expression on her face.

"Oh? Am I, who showed the secret arts of the Crimson Magic Clan, not the clear MVP?"

"Didn't you just mix a few materials or something? Not to mention, the guild's bartender is probably better at you at that anyway."

Megumin sullenly puffed her cheeks at my reply.

“Oi oi, if you’ve got a problem with it then why don’t we ask the witness? We can have her decide who did the most this time. Well, not like we all don’t already know what her answer is. It’s obviously none other than me!” I said, pointing at myself.

Then, I turned to the girl held in Darkness’s arms and who was the reason for the festivities in the guild.

“So, who do you think is number one?”

Hearing my question, the girl looked up at Darkness from within her embrace—

Chapter 1: Putting his sickly illegitimate child at ease

With the air of someone who's been given a very important mission, Aqua said.

"I have to tell everyone... I need to let everyone in the guild know..."

"W-Wait, Aqua, hold on a minute! Let me explain!"

Darkness has a daughter.

"First I should report to the guild lady, then I need to go to the people in Axis Cult, then I'll visit the grocer, the butcher, the old lady next door..."

"Aqua! Don't jump to conclusions! Would you take a closer look at this kid first!?!"

Looking at Darkness desperately try to convince Aqua who looks as though she was going to bolt at any moment, my eyes fell upon the girl that was the root of the whole situation.

"... 'Mommy'?"

The girl trembled in shock after hearing my words.

Everyone's gaze was focused on the girl that so closely resembled Darkness. Probably thinking that's she's done something very wrong, the girl in question had an uneasy expression on her face.

As for her age, she looks to be just slightly younger than Megumin's sister, who was at my house until just a short while ago.

In front of the little girl, Megumin said with the calmest voice she could muster.

"W-W-Well, for a noble, having children at a young age is almost an obligation. But this is great! Her face, hair and eyes are a splitting image of you! I'm sure she'll grow up to be a very beautiful lady."

"Megumin, that's not it! There's a proper explanation for this, just, please, listen to me!"

Just a while ago.

By completing a whole bunch of quests that have piled up in the guild, we've managed to resolve various problems that were plaguing the town.

Additionally, we had also managed to answer Komekko's exaggerated expectations of Axel's adventures that she got from Megumin's letters. By all rights, we should be going back to our normal everyday lives.

But...

"That's another one of your fetishes, isn't it? Still, something like this is no laughing matter..."

"N-n-no, that's not-"

Despite the undeniable proof of a girl who looks exactly like Darkness standing before her, she still adamantly refused to admit it.

"...Come to think about it, it all makes sense. With a personality like yours, there's no way you could be a virgin at this age! You slut! Just which thug did you fool around with!?"

"Don't make me kill you! As if a noble lady get into such a relationship that easily!"

This girl! What is she saying now after almost crossing the line with me so many times?

...Still, the child is innocent.

I squatted before the child and smiled reassuringly.

"What's your name, young lady?"

"A-Ah, wait, Sylphina, let me-!"

As Darkness frantically tried to stop her, the girl, who has been uneasily fiddling with her fingers, said in a soft voice.

"Dustiness for Sylphina."

"How could she be anything other than your daughter?"

"No, she's my cousin! It's only natural for cousins to have the same family name!"

Darkness desperately pleaded as she shook me, her face on the verge of tears-

“-Sylphina, these people here are all companions of mine, so you can relax. Here, introduce yourself.”

After we’ve all managed to calm down somewhat, we listened to Darkness’s explanation while drinking the green tea that Megumin brewed.

The girl who has been sitting quietly in the middle of the sofa up till now immediately stood up upon hearing Darkness’s words.

“I’m Sylphina. I’m Mommy’s...Lalatina-sama’s cousin. Nice to meet you.”

After introducing herself, the girl grasped the tips of her skirt and did a proper curtsy.

Her mannerisms contrasted uncannily against her age.

It’s probably due to the education she received as a noble.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Satou Kazuma, I’m a companion of your Mommy and work as an adventurer in this town. You can call me Onii-chan or Daddy.”

“What nonsense are you saying? Sylphina’s father is still alive!”

Sitting on the opposite side of the Dustiness ladies, Megumin and I huddled our heads together to have a whispered discussion.

“Kazuma, Kazuma. What do you think? She looks just like a smaller version of Darkness to me.”

“She has her face, hair, and eyes, but there still something off. If she is really Darkness’s daughter, I’m sure she’d be much more well built.”

“Hey, I can hear you, you know!? I already told you she’s my cousin! The reason why she calls me mommy is because I’ve been looking after her since she was young...!”

Sylphina let out a giggle as she looked upon our antics.

Noticing that, Megumin coughed to regain her composure.

“You’re Sylphina, right? I’m Megumin. As you can see, I’m a Crimson Demon, and Axel’s number one mage.”

“Megumin-sama...”

Perhaps thinking that her usual grandiose self introduction wouldn’t be suitable for a small child, Megumin introduced herself normally.

Sylphina looked awestruck. Perhaps she was curious about the strange naming sense of the crimson demons.

Just as she started wondering if she should treat Megumin’s name seriously or not, Darkness placed a hand on her head.

“Allow me to do a proper introduction. She’s my cousin, Dustiness ford Sylphina. Due to various circumstances, she has moved to this town...”

According to Darkness’s explanation, Sylphina lost her mother at a very young age, so she views Darkness who looked after her since as her mother.

Speaking of whom, Darkness’s mother was the older sister of Sylphina’s mother. Her maternal bloodline had strong magical power and magic resistance, but also weak immune systems. It seems like Sylphina herself is no exception.

On the other hand, Darkness seemed to have inherited both her father’s strong immune system and her mother’s magic resistance, forming the perfect exemplar of the Dustiness family.

“Exemplar?”

“S-Shut up, Kazuma. Do you have a of problem with it? Don’t interrupt my story until I’m done!”

Recently, the Demon King’s army has been extremely active, and it would be a terrible burden for her to respond to repeated emergency evacuations.

Thus, at the invitation of Duke Dustiness, she moved to the safest town in the country, Axel.

And after finding out that Darkness was staying at this mansion, she had come all the way here to play.

“I see, this cover story is quite detailed indeed.”

“Yeah, so far it does seem to hold up quite well.”

“It’s not a cover story! And think about her age! Just how old do I have to be to have a child of this age?”

Looking at Darkness’s agitated form, Sylphina let out another giggle.

And immediately lowered her head once again when she noticed everyone’s gaze.

“S-Sorry. It’s the first time I’ve seen mommy... Lalatina being this happy.”

“I’m not happy! Listen closely, Sylphina, you shouldn’t get too close to this man. It’d be a big problem if you end up being influenced by him like Iris-sama was.”

As she said that, she shuffled Sylphina behind her back, as though she wanted to protect her from me.

“You said your name is Sylphina, right? Your mommy might say that, but she’s barged in on onii-san when he was taking a bath, and even snuck into my bedroom at night...”

“Don’t listen to him, Sylphina! Hey, Megumin, help me say something too!”

Placing both hands on Sylphina’s ears, Darkness looked at Megumin with a pleading gaze.

“He’s not really lying, is he?”

“Me-Megumin!?”

Just then.

Sylphina, who was laughing at our antics this whole time, suddenly broke into a coughing fit.

“Sylphina, did you walk from my parent’s house to this mansion? You shouldn’t push yourself like that. I’ll tell my father, so you should rest here for tonight. Here, lie down on this sofa.”

“Yes, sorry, Mo-Lalatina.”

Looking at the girl who was trying to correct her way of addressing her even while she’s having a coughing fit, Darkness let out a gentle smile.

“Mommy’s fine. But, call me by name if people other than them are present.”

“Okay, Mommy!”

Hearing her words, Sylphina smiled despite looking as though she was still in pain.

It sure is a touching sight...

The two of us looked upon this touching scene...

Suddenly, Darkness stood up like she just thought of something.

“Ah, if it’s too painful, we can get Aqua to cast recovery magic-”

She looked around the room before abruptly pausing..

“...Say. Kazuma, where did Aqua go? I thought it was unusually quiet. When did she disappear?”

I jabbed my thumb towards the main door behind me.

“Oh, she snuck out the door right before you started talking.”

Watching Darkness run into the distance, Sylphina muttered,

“...Mommy left.”

The image of Sylphina sitting on top of the sofa wrapped up in a blanket made her appear as if she was a unfortunate child from a dysfunctional family. I can’t help but feel sympathetic to her.

“Leaving a small child here all alone... Just what is she thinking...”

“...Sylphina, right? Darkness will probably come back soon, so why don’t you play a game with us while we wait?”

Probably accustomed to dealing with children thanks to Komekko, Megumin gently smiled at Sylphina.

“Sure!”

With a slightly worried expression, Sylphina put on a weak smile—

“—I’m back.”

Said Megumin as she came through the door.

“Welcome home, my dear husband. How’s the situation outside the town?”

Sylphina said with a smile, still wrapped up in her blanket.

As you may have guessed, we are currently playing ‘house’.

“The situation outside the town? Well, there were more than 20 dragons flying about, so I thought I might as well get rid of them. Doesn’t even count as warm-up, really.”

Hearing what ‘father Megumin’ said, Sylphina, the ‘mother’, turned to me and said,

“Hear that, Kazuma? When you grow up, you have to be as great as your father!”

That’s right, I acted as their son.

I had set up the scenario to have a very powerful adventurer as the father.

By all rights, I should’ve been the one to play the role of the father, and Megumin would be playing the mother, but...

“I don’t want to be something as dangerous as an adventurer. I would rather become a merchant who deals with other people and get rich that way. I don’t want to do anything that will risk my life.”

“Eh?”

Sylphina exclaimed in shock, clearly not expecting it.

“Y-you can’t do that, Kazuma! What are you saying!? You have the blood of the legendary hero! There are still people who are suffering because of the

Demon King! As your mother, I won't allow you to do that! Darling, please help me talk some sense into him!"

Oh, so now I'm the descendant of a legendary warrior?

Sylphina gave Megumin a troubled expression, pleading for her help.

"Well, calm down, Sylphina. That is indeed a more realistic outlook on our future. Even though he's talented in combat, as a parent, I still wouldn't want my child to place himself in danger. Isn't it fine as long as our son lives a happy life?"

Hearing Megumin say something so reasonable for once, Sylphina nodded, though she still looked somewhat uncertain.

"W-well, that makes sense... Then, Kazuma, you should aim to make it big as a merchant, then use your wealth to support the other less fortunate heroes."

This is probably also due to her aristocratic education. She might be young, but Sylphina still set an admirably righteous goal for me.

However...

"I would rather use the profit and connections to entice some less intelligent noble ladies to gain power and status. Then I'd enjoy a leisurely lifestyle while basking in the veneration of the people."

"Darling, Kazuma...he—! Our son is turning into a delinquent!"

"Calm down, Sylphina, that kid has always been like this... However, Kazuma, tricking noble ladies isn't something you should do. As a commoner, the massive difference in status will definitely prevent you from establishing a truly loving relationship. Thus, you should rather look to marry a capable, easygoing and intelligent yet impoverished girl."

Why does it sound like you got some wires crossed in there?

"You heard what your daddy said, right Kazuma!? Letting your daddy down is very not okay!"

Saying that, Sylphina patted my head from the sofa.

Watching me get lectured by a young child, Megumin turned around and started trembling.

She seems to be trying to hold back her laughter.

“In that case, I want to sleep with daddy tonight. I want him to tell me his adventurer stories until I fall asleep.”

“Eh?”

Megumin was dumbstruck by my sudden comeback. Sylphina clapped her hands as if agreeing to my suggestion.

“That sounds like a great idea. Darling, go sleep with our son tonight and teach him the ins and outs of being an adventurer. I’ll be sleeping with mommy-...Lalatina-sama tonight.”

Sylphina said as she smiled expectantly.

It seems like she was searching for an excuse to sleep with Darkness.

Seeing her sit wrapped in a blanket all the way up to her neck, a radiant smile on her face, I couldn’t help but start wondering if I really am a Lolicon after all.

No, what I’m feeling now is fatherly instinct. It’s definitely not anything indecent.

It seems like Megumin had similar thoughts to me, before I realized it, she’s started petting Sylphina on the head

Looking down at the confused Sylphina, Megumin whispered,

“Having a child doesn’t seem so bad.”



Moments after she said that, Megumin regained her senses and gave me a dismissive wave.

“Don’t take what I just said the wrong way, I was just saying that creating a successor to my ultimately mortal flesh isn’t a bad idea...”

As if noticing how uncharacteristic her exclamation was, she desperately tried to cover it up by playing on her chuunibyou.

“If you want children, I’m ready to help you anytime you want.”

“What kind of horrible things are you saying in front of a child!?”

That night.

“Sylphina, I heard they played with you today? What did you guys play?”

Having returned much later with Aqua in tow, Darkness gently asked as she ate her grilled frog with her fork.

“Yes, these two played ‘house’ with me.”

Sylphina smiled brightly upon hearing Darkness’ voice as she battled the frog meat, seemingly still unused to the local cuisine of Axel..

While watching the duo who seemed to be more like sisters than mother and daughter—

“So, what did you do?”

—I interrogated Aqua who was kneeling on the floor as she reflected upon herself.

Aqua launched into a tirade as if she’s been waiting for me to ask this question.

“Listen to this, Kazuma! I was just spreading the news at the guild and other places, and then Darkness got angry beyond belief! I was caught and brutalized by Darkness to the point where I had to use heal on myself, then she threatened to use the power of her family to forbid all the liquor stores

in the town from selling alcohol to me. I was only speaking the truth! Don't you think she's going too far!?"

"How about you consider how I feel when I'm greeted with 'congratulations for having a child' every time I enter the guild!? The feeling when I get teased by the drunkards and having to let the guild staff speak up for me! And they even asked me who the child's father is..."

Hearing that, Sylphina lowered her head in sympathy.

"It's all because of me, sorry Mommy... It's been such a long time, so I just got excited and..."

"Ah, it's not your fault, Sylphina! I like children very much and never thought of you as a hassle! It's just because they were ridiculing me and betting on who the father was..."

Then, Darkness inexplicably glared at me.

"Kazuma got the most votes, second place being the bear-esque noble guy who disappeared to nowhere. Who was next again? Right, that blonde delinquent whose name I can't recall was next!"

"It's a little awkward to be saying this myself, but isn't that list full of nothing but strange men?"

"Shut it! I don't want to hear that from you!"

—After dinner, everyone surrounded Sylphina to talk about their adventures. Aqua even let Sylphina play with her treasured gaming console. Together, we shared a peaceful and joyous moment...

Afterwards, as I played with the console I confiscated from Aqua, I heard a knock on my door.

"Kazuma, are you still awake? Can I come in?"

Megumin's seemingly nervous voice came from behind the door.

"Sure, I'm awake, but I don't really want to let you in. After all, the only reason you come here at this time is to play with my emotions and get my hopes up before leaving me with blue balls."

"The hell? Don't make me sound like some sort manipulative bitch! I never tried to play with your emotions!"

Well, then you're one hell of a temptress.

From under the blanket, I briefly put down my controller and glanced at Megumin through the door crack.

"So, what is up? Do you want me to keep you company while you sleep?"

I said sarcastically as I shifted my attention back to the game—

"Indeed, I want to sleep with you tonight."

Hearing Megumin say such things so casually, I couldn't help but be petrified.

And the character Aqua had raised through countless days of hard work got shredded to pieces by monsters.

"Look, I won't fall for the same trick again. I'm not like Aqua who never learns from experience. Don't think I'll just dumbly fall for your honeyed words just because I'm a teenage virgin."

That's right, I still have my beloved succubus-san for that.

I might have suffered a sleepless night yesterday after what she said about becoming more than friends but less than lovers, but I won't always be that stupid.

After succumbing to the same trick so many times, there's no way I would fall for it yet again.

"What are you talking about? Weren't you the one who wanted to sleep with me tonight? Did you forget about what you said while we were playing with Sylphina?"

In response to Megumin's exasperated words, I threw away the game console.

I said that.

That's right, I did say that, I definitely did say that!

...No, wait a second. It's not time to panic just yet!

“Wh-what? Why are you so guarded? You too have been sending me all kinds of signals lately, so what are you making such a fuss for?”

Sounding somewhat confused, Megumin took a couple of steps closer as she said that.

“I’m not making a fuss. I’m just frustrated about being that typical male protagonist from a low-quality romcom who always gets cut-off mid development. That’s what making me angry. I’m at my most active age, you know? What do you and Darkness find so fun about teasing an innocent virgin guy like me? You should know that it’s really painful for a guy to get into that kind of mood only for nothing to happen.”

“Er, well, personally, I just wanted to convey my feelings and deepen our relationship. I didn’t know that it would cause you pain. I-I apologize for that...”

Seeing my sudden outburst, Megumin broke out into cold sweat and pieced together an apology despite her confusion.

“If you understand that, then leave. All thanks to you saying such strange things, the character that Aqua treats like her son ended up dying. If I don’t hurry up and make it back to where she was by tonight, she’ll start screeching tomorrow morning.”

“No, wait a second, I really have important things to say to you tonight, please don’t chase me away! Actually, if you keep treating me as less important than a game, I will really become angry!”

Facing Megumin’s persistent demeanor, I pushed myself off the bed to look at her.

“What? I don’t really care about sleeping together or spending the night together anymore. I’d get all flustered and excited, and it’d end up being little more than a prolonged mental torture session for a young man like me. I’d rather sleep alone than be blue-balled at the last moment again.”

“...Sure, it’s my fault to leave you hanging after getting your hopes up, but I really didn’t expect you to make such a big fuss over it.... No, okay, let’s put aside the issue of sleeping together for now. Can we just chat for a while?”

.....

“Well, that’d be kind of a waste, and also be kind of lonely...”

“You really are troublesome, Kazuma! Anyway, I’m letting myself in!”

Megumin closed the door behind her as she stepped in, and without another word, moved to sit on my bed.

Full of spirit just a while ago, Megumin now stared at the ground and fell silent.

She seems to be trying to say something, and her face gradually turned red...

“Hey, cut it out! Why are you blushing like that? If you have something to say, then just spit it out! Why do you people keep insisting on doing things that are bad for my heart? It really makes me feel really uncomfortable, you know!?”

“H-hold on, don’t rush me like that! We gotta start with small talk, don’t we? There’s a lot we can talk about. Let’s not rush things, we can start with a normal conversation and go from there!”

With her whole face bright red, Megumin blurted out without even lifting her head.

“What are you playing at!? Coming to another person’s bedroom this late at night, then asking to make small talk with them!?”

Perhaps realizing how stupid she sounded, Megumin’s eyes started glowing red,

“Er-Oh, right! What actually happened between you and Iris? Even though we didn’t bother clearing it up because of Komekko’s arrival, I’m still really concerned about what made you throw us aside to stay at the capital.”

Dammit, dragging up those ancient topics that I tried so hard to bury.

At the time, I said that I couldn’t remember the details due to the lingering effects of the potion and didn’t tell the entire story...

“That’s just, you know, the person I’ve always regarded as my sister, Iris, cried and hung on to me and just won’t let me leave. She even said ‘I like onii-chan so much’ with teary eyes, and stuff like ‘I love onii-chan’ and ‘Iris will die if onii-chan doesn’t stay at the capital’, so even someone as heartless as me was touched.”

“Why is this man still so weak willed? Also, did she really say things like loving you and dying if you didn’t stay?”

The memory erasing potion might have caused my brain to add in a few details, but that’s about how it played out.

....Wait.

“AAHHHHHHH, CRAAAAAAP!”

I suddenly remembered something and violently shot up from my bed.

“Wh-why are you doing all of a sudden? Don’t make such loud noises this late at night!! What if someone comes to check!?”

“No, Iris! I forgot about Iris! Before I was force-fed the memory wiping potion, Iris told me to write her a letter when I remembered her. She said she’ll keep waiting!”

Crap, I have to send this as soon as possible.

Iris may very well end up losing hope for this world and end up doing something unthinkable.

I hurried to the desk and prepared to write—

“Hold on a moment.”

Megumin tugged on my shirt from the bed.

“What is it? I remembered something important thanks to your small talk. It’s urgent, so don’t get in my way.”

“There’s literally a young girl in your bedroom right now, and you’re writing a letter to another girl right in front of her? You really are amazing, aren’t you? By the way, um...”

Still holding onto my shirt, Megumin raised her head and asked resolutely,

“Do you still remember what I said last night?”

Her eyes glowed at an intensity I’ve never witnessed before, matching her face which was beet red all the way to her ears.

“The thing about being between friends and lovers?”

There's no way I could forget that.

Because of what she said, I basically got no sleep that night.

Hearing my tense response, Megumin nodded, her face still as red as it was before.

"Indeed, that. My wish to be more than friends but less than lovers. I've come to hear your answer tonight."

...Eh?

"Was that supposed to be a confession last night? When I saw you leave without hearing what I had to say, I thought you were just up to your usual temptress tricks and setting me up to be blue-balled again."

"Just what kind of girl do you see me as, Kazuma? I'd never play with anyone's emotions like that!"

If you want to say that, then stop teasing me with such words and skinship before leaving me high and dry.

"So, what's your answer?"

Saying that, Megumin brought her glowing eyes closer...!

"Hey, you're too close! Your face is too close—Eh, wait, so, I were to say 'let's go out', would be officially be in a relationship? In the first place, what exactly did you mean by 'more than friends but less than lovers'? Wouldn't we be better off as a straight-up, ordinary couple? Why do we have to be so fuzzy about that? Isn't it the most important bit!?"

"No, if we were to just straight up become lovers, well, think about it, wouldn't we have trouble knowing how to act in front of everyone? Rather than just charge straight into this, I think we should take this more slowly, step-by-step, inch-by-inch..."

Perhaps only just realizing how embarrassing her words were, Megumin suddenly started fidgeting bashfully.

"Why are you acting like such a maiden? You're giving me goosebumps, stop!"

"I am a maiden! Be it in age or otherwise, I'm a proper maiden! Just how have you been seeing me up till now!?"

She's always been overly direct about such matters, so her new attitude took me by complete surprise.

"...Could you be getting a little desperate? I don't think it's very likely, but you're not developing some kind of yandere complex towards Iris, are you? Calm down and think about it, even I'm not trashy enough to make moves on such a young girl."

"You have quite the gall to say that after abandoning us to stay at the capital. Yeah, I am getting desperate. I'm only able to say this right now because I am calm. When you first told us that you weren't coming back, I nearly burst into tears. I can't say this enough, please don't make me worry like that."

In response to her rising tensions, the glow in her eyes increased in intensity.

I've seen her eyes glow many times before, but I've never seen them in such a vibrant shade of red.

"And I'm very well aware that I'm a crappy archwizard. So if a more sensible and more powerful girl who shares much of my traits were to show up...!"

As she spoke, Megumin irately clutched at my collar.

Crap; that's the offensive shade of red!

"I-I get it! I was in the wrong! That was all my fault, so I'll apologize! I'm sorry!"

Even after hearing my apology, the brilliant crimson glow from Megumin did not diminish in the slightest.

"So, do you or do you not wish to become more than friends but less than lovers with me?"

Megumin said with a completely serious—and slightly angry—face.

What is up with that? Has there ever been a confession as unromantic as this in history?

Rather than a confession, Megumin's tone suggested more of a threat. She kept bringing her face closer.

Before I can answer, I must confirm something.

“When you say ‘between friends but less than a couple’, how far can we go? Think about it, isn’t it too broad? You get what I mean?”

Hearing my words, Megumin lowered her head red-faced.

“I know, I know, alright? Come to think of it, we haven’t really done that sort of thing yet, have we? Very well, let’s do it then. It’s too late tonight, so how about tomorrow morning?”

It’s too late tonight?

Tomorrow morning?

“Wait, isn’t that sort of thing usually done late at night?”

“...Hold on Kazuma, I think we’re thinking about different things. What exactly are you asking about? I think we’ve had a similar problem in the past before, so why don’t we say what we are thinking at the count of three?”

One, two...

“Make children.”

“Go on a date.”

I see. Yeah, come to think of it, we haven’t ever gone on a proper date before.

“Hey.”

Facing Megumin’s slowly souring expression, I hammered my palm as if everything finally made sense—

“Yeah, we haven’t gone on a proper date yet. It would be problematic if we were to skip that step and went straight to lovers...”

“Making babies!? Well alright, not that I’m agreeing with what mom said yesterday, but as long as you are willing to take responsibility... Being forced into getting married due to me being pregnant does indeed sound more fitting for us...”

Megumin made an expression akin to that of Archimedes during his Eureka moment and said with a sigh.

“...Hearing the term ‘wedding’ makes me a little anxious. I wonder why...”

“Wait a second, when you tried to cross that line with me in that hotel room awhile ago, didn’t you say that you loved me too!?”

Now that she mentioned it, I do remember something like that happening.

At the time I was mesmerized by Megumin’s seduction, and talked about some parenting-related matters while embracing her.

“That and this is completely different. Because of what you told me, various issues kept me awake last night, so after playing with Sylphina, I went out and paid a special fee for a nap.”

“What do naps have to do with you said just now? I don’t follow at all!”

Boys experience something known as sage mode.

My name is Satou Kazuma.

Right now, I’m a man who won’t easily be influenced by beauty or emotions into accepting such heavy responsibilities.

“Megumin, how old are you this year? You’re about to turn 15, right? So I think that, rather than a ‘make children, get married’ approach, we should start with more regular interactions. Let’s properly think about this, both of us haven’t even gone on a date before, right? So if we were to suddenly have children and have a sudden wedding, it’d end terribly for both us and our offspring.”

“You were the one who brought up babymaking in the first place!”

Megumin said agitatedly.

“No, wait, seriously, think about it. Now that I think about it, we still don’t know very much about each other, do we? Come on, Megumin, didn’t you keep saying that you are a proper adult? I love you, so let’s make babies and get married isn’t a very mature idea by any standard.”

“That’s only because you brought it up! Really, what’s wrong with you? Weren’t you all for this, Kazuma!? You’re strange enough already, but today you’re particularly...!”

Then, after seeing me keep my cool even in this situation, Megumin seems to have figured out what’s happening in my head

The blush slowly vanished from her face as she looked at me with...

That’s the same look Darkness gave me when she catches me watching her walk through the mansion in lingerie; that look of utter disrespect.

“What should I do with this man ...? Acting distant the moment the topic switches away from sex. I didn’t expect you to be this far gone... After going that far with me, after all those things you did with me to advance our relationship to such a heated level, was that all so you could have sex!? How could you turn ice cold as soon as your hopes of reproducing are crushed...!”

“Hey, hold it, you! We have merely bathed together, slept together and hugged. Don’t put it like that! If you’re going to describe it that, then why don’t I actually do something worthy of being treated like such”

“If you are going to keep talking about meaningless stuff like that, then I’m prepared to do what I must.”

Ouch, that look. As if staring at trash.

Finally, Megumin deeply exhaled and said,

“You always were this kind of person, weren’t you? Even knowing that, I still can’t bring myself to hate you. Just how simple a woman could I be...”

Even as she said that, Megumin’s face was still stern as ever. Though that gaze of hers has downgraded from “looking at trash” to “looking at a suspicious item.”

“Er, well... Since the atmosphere for confessing is long gone, what should we do from now?”

Megumin let the tension bleed from her shoulders and sat motionless, staring at me as if waiting for my response.

But, even if you ask me ‘what should we do from now on’...

To be honest, though I've been together with Megumin and the others for a long time, I never really thought about whose route I would go down. In the first place, I still don't truly understand my own emotions.

Never mind dating, I don't even have much contact with the opposite sex before this. What is love? What does it mean to pine for someone? Those kind of things are all...

... ..

Eh?

What's going on? I just casually tried to imagine the future...

I used to think that suddenly marrying and having a child to take care of would be devastating, but when I mentally placed Megumin in the co-pilot's seat, I suddenly couldn't care less about all those burdens.

Even now, where there's still a whole bunch of loose ends that have yet to be addressed, I'm still wholeheartedly looking forward to going on a date and such with Megumin.

Going out and spending time casually chatting the day away, and me going "Hey Megumin, since we've some free time, why don't we pack a lunch, find a pretty lake somewhere and make some waves with explosion?"

...eh?

What's happening?

What the hell is this?

"Hey, hey Megumin, this is bad! I might actually be in love with you!"

"You're trash! You really are trash! Totally, absolutely, completely trash! 'Might actually be in love with me'!? Was that supposed to be a confession!? Couldn't you pick your words a little more carefully!?"

You shouldn't expect that much from a virgin.

I was breaking out in cold sweat and mentally kicking myself right now.

Seeing my troubled expression, Megumin said to me,

“...Sigh. You really are someone who always messes up when it matters the most. Really... Well, I did say that I like that unpredictable side of yours, so I can’t get angry even if I wanted to...”

Megumin sounded defeated, but at the same time I could see just the barest hint of amusement in her eyes.

I started to relax after seeing her face, only to have her shoot me a deathly glare the moment I heaved a breath.

S-sorry!

“...So, what should we do in the future? Well... Uh... About our relationship... After today...”

Megumin said with a slightly anxious expression.

Her face is just a little flushed and her voice is low.

Er...

“Wh-what should we do? Well, to be honest, I’ve never experienced something this amazing in my life. If you suddenly ask me about what to do when dating a girl, I wouldn’t have a clue. So, if our relationship is really that which is more than friends but lesser than lovers, I guess I wouldn’t need to get all panicky. I’m honestly overjoyed. You might have some strange quirks, but you still are a beautiful girl after all... So um, I’d say... a relationship like that is...alright...-ish?”

Hearing my response,

“...O-okay then... Let’s leave it at that for now.....P-plus, this way, it wouldn’t be too awkward for the others...”



Seemingly blushing from being called 'beautiful', Megumin breathed a sigh of relief and quietly said.

Watching her act like this, I inexplicably started feeling shy, too.

What the hell, we're like a stereotypical awkward couple right now.

Crap, this is really bad. It's a refreshing and sweet feeling that makes my heart race!

Oh, right, how should we break this to Darkness and Aqua?

Do we tell them?

How will things progress in the future?

More than friends but less than a couple...

Does that mean that it would be okay for us to act like lovers?

And how far are we allowed to act like lovers? Where is the line...?

Just as I worried over those details, Megumin said to me,

"Right, then, before we officially become lovers, it would be best to keep this a secret from Aqua and Darkness... And obviously, for the sake of keeping it discreet, we should put off any mature activities for now..."

"Eh?"

Chapter 2: Granting Despair for these Upstarts

“Give him back! The Schneider that I carefully groomed and raised... return him to me, you shitty NEET!!”

“I made it back to where you were before, so give it a rest already! I can’t help it if he’s dead! Schneider has gone to another world and is doing just fine. Who knows, he might even have defeated the Demon King and be having a parade thrown in his honour right now.”

The next morning.

As expected, Aqua started screaming at me in the main hall where we usually relaxed, upset over losing her carefully groomed character. And thus began yet another day.

“... Really? Is Schneider really doing fine in another world?”

“Yeah, he is, he has built up a harem of beautiful girls and is living quite happily, so don’t worry about him.”

As I spouted such things to comfort Aqua, Megumin came down the stairs.

“Good morning. Isn’t it awfully early for both of you to be up?”

“Yeah, I took Darkness and her kid out to play with Zell today. I think it’s the first time her kid has fed a dragon. It was really cute seeing her be that tense.”

That probably has more to do with her worrying about accidentally killing it than anything else.

“Speaking of, I don’t see her around. Where did Sylphina go?”

“Darkness took her out to town, saying that she wanted to have Sylphina play with children her own age.”

Darkness seems to really care about her. It’s almost like she’s really her mother.

Megumin broke into a warm smile upon hearing that.

“Is that so. I hope that girl gets used to Axel quickly.”

Ignoring Megumin, Aqua, who was leisurely lounging on the sofa, directed a question at me.

“By the way, I know Megumin usually gets up pretty early, but why are you up this early as well, Kazuma-san?”

Normally the word dense would not be adequate to describe Aqua, but she just becomes strangely observant at times like this.

I woke up early because I was looking forward to my first date with Megumin, but I can't possibly say that in front of her.

“Actually, Megumin seems to have gotten up earlier than usual too...”

Hearing Aqua's words, Megumin jumped up in surprise and averted her gaze.

“W-what are you saying?! I always wake up around this time! You just think that because both you and Kazuma usually wake up late! Plus, today's weather is excellent for explosions. Of course I would wake up early!”

Hearing Megumin frantically spew out all those words, Aqua blankly tilted her head.

... Could it be that Megumin was looking forward to this date as much as I am?

Indeed, a date.

My first date with a girl.

I went on a stroll with Darkness back in Alcanretia, and I also went on countless explosion trips with Megumin, but those didn't have the right mood, so they don't count.

Just as Megumin and I were stealing glances at each other,

“Ohoh... I see, so that's what's going on with you two.”

Aqua broke out into a sly grin. She just seems to be uncannily sharp at the most inconvenient of times.

“W-What? What do you mean by that, Aqua?”

“You better wipe that stupid grin of your face, otherwise I will do it for you!”

Despite both of our words, Aqua covered her grin with her hand and said,

“The both of you woke up early to eat the leftover frog steak from yesterday’s dinner, right? Well, too bad, the earliest riser, that’s right, me, has already eaten them!”

Oh. It’s just Aqua being Aqua again.

... Wait a second.

“You did what!? I was saving that on purpose! I was going to use them in the sandwiches I was taking with me today! That’s why I properly prepared them last night! Why are you always causing trouble for me?”

“What? I already ate them, so I can’t do anything about that! What are you getting so angry for? If you want sandwiches, I’ll gladly help you make more.”

After learning that I specifically prepared them last night, Aqua seemed like she was really remorseful and immediately apologized.

“Anyway, where are you guys going with said sandwiches? If you two are going out to play, I want to come too.”

“...”

“EXPLOOOOOOOOOOSION!”

The sound of an explosion rang out over the lake near Axel.

The powerful blast parted the waters of the lake, and the shockwave it created sent large waves crashing all over its surface.

The large quantity of water blasted into the sky rained down upon us as mist, refracting the morning light to create a rainbow over the lake.

“Today’s explosion scores ninety-five points! Not only is it potent, but the mist created by the blast makes the morning air more refreshing, and even adds a rainbow garnish over the whole performance. The only thing lacking is practical application. If there were any, it would be worth more points.”

Hearing my report, Megumin held a satisfied smile as she collapsed to the ground.

“There is only so much practicality it can have without an appropriate monster to target. This is still the highest score I’ve received in quite some time, so I think today will be a good day!”

Megumin said that with a contented expression.

I crouched and used ‘Drain Touch’ to give her just enough mana to move on her own.

Then, I noticed something.

“Hey, hold on, that explosion killed quite a fair amount of fish. Let’s grab those guys and grill them. The number of frog steak sandwiches is lower than I expected, but we can quite easily grill those fish as a replacement. Nice, great job Megumin!”

“That-That means...”

Having absorbed my mana, Megumin stood up and gave me an expectant look.

“Today’s explosion is worth ninety-eight points!”

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you very much!!”

Looking at Megumin shedding tears of joy as she repeatedly thanked me, I too started to tear up as I nodded back.

And looking at us from the side...

“Hey, is this the kind of stupid things you guys get up to whenever I’m not around?”

Aqua rudely commented while munching on a sandwich.

“Pardon me, Aqua!? What do you mean by stupid?! This is an extremely important step in order to build up my repertoire as an Explosion Connoisseur.”

“Yeah, Aqua! Recently, the score I get from the explosion will even influence my mood, health, and various other factors for the rest of the day. Explosion isn’t a game!”

“I don’t understand and I don’t want to understand, but I get it. It’s one of those things that I’m better off not getting myself involved in.”

It seems that Aqua has started being able to learn from her mistakes.

However...

“Hey, Megumin, this is a date, right?”

I whispered quietly to Megumin.

“I don’t know. I don’t exactly know a whole lot about dating either... Packing a lunch, going to a beautiful place with someone you like and doing something you enjoy together... Is that not what a date is?”



I see, so this is a date.

The feeling that this is exactly like how we usually spend our time together is probably just my imagination.

The reason that it doesn't feel romantic is probably because Aqua's here.

We're both a little embarrassed about our first date, so Aqua ended up getting invited, but in the future, I'm sure...

"These sandwiches are really delicious. Hey, do you want to take a nap after eating the grilled fish? Ah, this really is a good day for a picnic. We should invite Darkness and that Sylphina girl to join us next time."

Aqua said that while skewering the fish she caught from the lake in preparation for the grill.

Ah... that's not it.

This isn't a date, it's a family picnic!

After the family picnic, on our way back...

The guardsman manning the gate called out to us as we approached the town of Axel.

"Hey, you guys are adventurers, right? There was an emergency call earlier. Shouldn't you hurry to the guild hall?"

—The adventurer's guild.

Located right in the middle of town, it's the headquarters of all anti-monster activities.

It's a fortress for adventurers and an establishment that they put their trust in.

Heeding the words of the guardsman, we arrived at the hall, but...

In front of the guild hall...

“Alright, adventurers, please line up here. This is an emergency. It’s an emergency summon. Sorry to trouble you all.”

The guild ladies who are normally found behind the counters shout out as they direct the arriving adventurers.

... Huh?

We retrieved our equipment from the mansion and rushed here after hearing about an emergency quest, but why are they calling us to line up here during an emergency?

Just as I thought that, I noticed the guild workers, as well as what appeared to be civil servants start surrounding us, as if to form a barricade around us adventurers.

Actually...

It’s almost like they are moving to prevent us from escaping.

The suspicious situation is starting to create a buzz amongst the adventurers.

...Just what is going on?

“Hey, something’s off. Should we run away? My sixth sense is telling me that it’s best to get away from here as fast as possible.”

“What a coincidence, Kazuma. I’ve a bad feeling too. It’s probably my goddess intuition.”

Hearing Aqua’s words just increased my sense of unease.

At that time, a person approached us.

That’d be Darkness, who had vanished early this morning to send Sylphina off somewhere.

“The two of you should relax. If you don’t break the law, nothing bad will happen to you, so just relax.”

Darkness said while hiding one arm behind her back.

... Hmm, actually.

“Do you know what kind of emergency this is?”

I asked of Darkness who was standing there with one arm behind her back.

All of the adventurers were fully equipped, except Darkness who wore a simple black shirt and a casual skirt. I can't help but ask her what's going on.

But Darkness didn't answer me.

My surroundings are filled with uneasy murmurs.

A tense atmosphere quickly descended upon all the adventurers gathered here.

... But we adventurers are well aware.

The adventurer's guild is a government organization set up for adventurers.

It's an establishment designed to support us.

We dutifully complete the jobs we receive from the guild, and at the same time the guild also helps us whenever we get into trouble.

There shouldn't be any reason for the Guild and adventurers to have an adversarial relationship.

If there's no reason for us to work against each other, there shouldn't be any reason for us to be enemies.

Such is the prevailing sentiment being carried along with the murmurs, and with it the tense atmosphere that enveloped the crowd slowly began to lessen.

Just then.

“I have an urgent request for everyone. Indeed, it's an emergency quest. For there is only a month till the end of the fiscal year. Yes, today is the last day that people can pay their taxes.”

The guild lady standing in front of the group of guild workers gathered ahead of us said with a bright smile on her face.

“Some of you adventurers gathered here have yet to pay their taxes.”

All the adventurers present stood frozen in shock.

“W-W-What is going on? What the hell is going on? Hey, Aqua, just what is-”

“C-C-Calm down. Calm down, Kazuma. Just calm down. I’m sure there must be some kind of mistake!”

Those adventurers who wanted to escape after hearing the guild lady’s words were restrained by the line of guild staff and civil servants who surrounded them like a wall.

Some tried to run, some cried, and others raged.

Though they all had different expressions, there’s one commonality amongst all of them, and that is that every adventurer present is letting out an anguished scream.

“It’s true, we’ve never raised such a matter with you all before. Of course we wouldn’t, adventurers in general tend to be in rough financial straits. As such, thus far we have exempted you... No, allowed you not to pay taxes out consideration for your economic status.”

Standing some distance away from the adventurers, a man who seemed to be a civil servant called out.

He continues speaking.

“The adventurer’s guild is of course supported through tax money. Naturally, this includes the reward money given out for dealing with monsters. However, just because they are earned by killing monsters doesn’t mean that they should be exempt from taxes. We’ve simply not been collecting them out of understanding for your financial situation. But everyone present should have earned quite a bit this year... yes, the reward for taking down the Kowloon Hydra... Thus far, you’ve all been allowed not to pay taxes due to the compassion of the state. But surely, after collecting such a large sum of money, you should fulfill your obligation to the state, no?”

After hearing those words, the Adventurers who were trying to resist fell silent.

It’s only to be expected. After all it was their first time hearing about such a thing.

Up till now, adventurers have had the privilege of being exempt from taxes simply by virtue of being an adventurer.

Now that we are wealthy, it's only natural that we should start paying proper taxes.

We are residents of this town after all, we should do our part as well.

Just then, an adventurer asked a question.

“Umm, just how much will be taken as taxes?”

The civil servant from before replied.

“All adventurers who earned more than ten million this year shall be taxed half their total income—”

And all the adventurers present scattered to the winds.

“Aqua, what should we do? What the hell do they mean by half? How many hundreds of millions do I have to pay in taxes?”

“I have no money left! I spent it all! You still have to pay taxes even if you are bankrupt! I don't want to be in debt again! Let's run! Let's run far, far away, Kazuma! The tax laws in this world are very simple, everyone has to pay taxes in the first month of autumn. The income of the entire year up till then will be tabulated, and that amount must be paid by the end of the first month of autumn.”

Aqua said to the panicking me.

“It really is easy to understand. Speaking of, isn't today the last day of the first month of autumn? Then what happens if we run? What happens if we don't pay it off by today?”

“The taxes will be waived! The taxes will be waived once office hours are over on the last day.”

Is it really that simple?

“Will that really be fine? They won't hound us to pay up?”

“What are you saying?”

Aqua exclaimed after hearing the perplexed tone in my voice.

“All the laws in this world are made by aristocrats. Of course they would implement laws that favour them. For low income civilians, it'd be cheaper for them to just simply pay the taxes rather than taking a vacation to avoid it, so most people will simply pay up. However, the wealthy and the nobility would take a vacation around this time and will only return at the start of the next month.”

What horrible people.

No, wait, even in a modern country like Japan, there exist people who would do this kind of stuff.

So the aristocrats of this country...!

“Just how greedy are these aristocrats!? How cheap! I want to do that too!”

“W-Wait, there are some kind-hearted people amongst the aristocrats too, don't just lump them all together...”

Darkness interrupted with a troubled expression on her face.

Speaking of whom, doesn't she need to run?

Just when I was about to say ‘Aren't you one of those rich aristocrats who need to pay a large amount of taxes too?’, I noticed what she was holding in her hand.

Probably thinking that it'd be bad to injure someone, all the adventurers around me only blindly focused on running away.

Even under such chaotic circumstances, I couldn't help but be drawn to what Darkness had in her hand.

“What are you holding?”

“Oh this? You use it like so...”

Darkness said as she locked the one of the chained iron restraints around her right hand.

They resemble the handcuffs found in Japan.

I already knew that Darkness is a pervert, so it isn't unexpected for her do something like this, but.

"What are you doing?"

I asked in an exasperated tone, but Darkness didn't reply.

Wait, I don't have time to bother with her.

Simply put, all I have to do is avoid being captured for today and I won't need to pay any taxes.

Just as I was about to grab Aqua and Megumin and run-

"Megumin-san, yes? Let's see... your personal earnings aren't very high this year, so you need not pay taxes. Thank you for your cooperation!"

... Megumin has already completed her tax filings.

Perhaps noticing my gaze, the penniless girl glanced over and gave me a smug smile.

Damnit, that just leaves me, Aqua and Darkness...

Kaclick

.....

"What are you doing?"

I asked Darkness in the same exasperated tone I used before.

I don't know what came over this pervert to attach the other end of the handcuff to my left wrist.

What's she doing at a time like this?

This musclehead occasionally comes up with ideas as stupid as Aqua's, that's why she's so troublesome.

Darkness gave me an extremely bright smile, and in a tone of voice that suggested that she was inviting me on an afternoon stroll, said,

"Paying taxes is the duty of citizens. Now, come on, let us go, Mr Biggest-Earner-in-this-Town."

Oh, right, she is next in line to become the ruler of this town! Crap!

“L-Let me go! Dammit! You bastard... You bastard!”

“Hahahaha, aren’t we close friends? You shouldn’t be so harsh. Come on, let’s go. You too, Aqua.”

In the chaotic guild hall, the various adventurers who were trying to escape are being snapped up one by one.

In the middle of that frenzy, the handcuffed Darkness said that as she grabbed Aqua’s hand and started pulling on the both of us.

“NOOO! Please, Darkness, let me go! Kazuma-san! Kazuma-san! Please do something!”

Aqua screamed and slapped at the hand Darkness was using to grab her, but Darkness didn’t seem notice at all.



I immediately shouted towards Aqua.

“Hey, Aqua, cast your buff magic on us! The ones that boosts strength and speed! If you cast it on us we’ll be able to lift her up and drag her along with us! We can easily carry her if we work together!”

“Mu...”

Hearing my words, Darkness immediately released her grip on Aqua.

“... Aqua, I’ll let you go. You may flee as you wish. There are already watchmen posted all throughout the town, but if you can avoid getting caught by them, you may do as you will. But, in exchange for letting you go, you must not cast any sort of status boosting magic on this man.”

“Ah, you underhanded bastard! Hey, Aqua, this is just a trick to divide us! Don’t listen to her, hurry up and buff me!”

“... ”

In response, Aqua wordlessly took a step back.

And then...

“... So-sorry, Kazuma, I think my chances of escaping will be higher if there’s someone else to occupy them... Plus, if you were to escape, the second richest adventurer in this town will probably be me. If that were to happen, the number of tax collectors chasing after me would increase...”

Really, why is she only smart at the most inconvenient of times?

“Okay, I got it, Aqua. If you buff me, I’ll tell you a method that’s guaranteed to let you safely escape on your own. What do you think of that?”

“... Just a while ago, you abandoned us to live a luxurious life at the capital. Do you really expect me to just trust you now?”

I can’t even retort.

“O-Okay, fine, I’ll tell you that method right now. If you think it’s workable, then just buff my strength or speed, either one would do. Just buff me!”

“I... Okay, fine, tell me what to do.”

I carefully whispered into Aqua’s ear.

Then...

“Kazuma, let’s meet up at the mansion if we both manage to escape. I’ll buff both your strength and speed!”

Aqua said as she applied her spells upon me.

After that, she applied her magic upon herself before breaking out of the chaotic encirclement and running off towards the town.

“I don’t know what you told her, but she sure seems quite confident in her chances.”

Darkness, who has been quietly listening to our exchange, casually commented.

Why is she so relaxed?

“You sure are relaxed, aren’t you? I won’t lose to you in strength after being buffed. I’m going to drain your magic until you pass out, then pick you up like a piece of luggage and run off.”

“Save those words for when you actually manage to lift me up.”

Darkness replied with a fearless smile upon her face, raising both arms in the sky as though she was daring me to pick her up if I could.

Accepting that challenge, I moved to pick Darkness up...

“U-umm, Darkness-san? Doing something like this in public is... making me j-just a little nervous...”

“D-Don’t say that, you’ll make me nervous too...”

While face to face with Darkness, I hugged her around the waist and tried to lift her...

“Why aren’t you moving at all?”

Hearing my words, Darkness laughed as though she was declaring her victory.

“Ha, this operation has been in the works for quite some time. I originally intended for it to take place at the start of this month, but a lot of things have been happening recently... And just when things started to calm down

for a bit, you declared that you wouldn't be returning home. You really gave me a headache back then."

How could this happen? I really underestimated this girl.

I only regarded her as a sheltered noble lady. I completely underestimated her resolve.

"But we managed to make it in time...! Plus, from the moment we started planning this operation, I knew that you would try and escape. It's my job to nail down such high income adventurers like you. In preparation for this day-!"

"In preparation for this day... ! You-you didn't deliberately fatten yourself for this, did you!? I know you were worried about how well-defined your abs were, but I didn't expect you deliberately add more flab to—!?"

Darkness abruptly pulled on my arm before I managed to finish my sentence.

"I'm wearing weights! Look! I tied a ton of weights to myself under my clothes! See! Do you see them!?"

Darkness hastily opened her shirt to reveal that she was indeed wearing a series of lead, or perhaps something heavier, weights underneath.

... Wait, did she walk all the way here in that condition?

But this is bad. This is really bad.

"D-Damnit! Guild lady, I thought you were on our side!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm also a civil servant. We won't get our summer bonus if we don't do this. I'm very sorry!"

Cries like that echoed all throughout the guild hall. Several of the adventurers I recognised have already been captured.

The adventurers who have completed their taxes gathered listlessly over at the tables next to the hall.

Megumin was there as well, leisurely sipping the tea that the guild workers brought over for her.

“Dammit, why did you come up with such a convoluted scheme? At this point you might as well just barge into the houses of rich folks and start taking anything that looks valuable!”

“No, I can’t do that. People would buy volatile explosive potions, put them in places where tax collectors are likely to search and bait them into setting them off. Then after the potions detonate, they would sue the tax collectors for property damage and demand a large amount of compensation...”

The number of adventurers struggling with the civil servants around me is starting to thin.

This isn’t good. It won’t be long now before my turn comes up...

“... It doesn’t seem like you have any intention of moving. Is there really no room for discussion? Knowing your personality, a bribe probably wouldn’t convince you.”

Hearing my words, Darkness furrowed her brow.

“Don’t be silly, Kazuma. The Dustiness house will not make allowances for anyone nor tolerate any form of corruption. Just give it up—”

“STEAL!”

I stole a single weight from Darkness as she was speaking.

As I carelessly threw it aside, Darkness said.

“... Hey, Kazuma, your Steal has a high chance of targeting a lady’s underwear. Let’s not do something like that in front of so many people. Cease your resistance and just pay the tax—”

“STEAL!”

Oops, I missed.

The item I received is a set of black tights that Darkness was just wearing.

Watching me sneakily stuff it into my pocket, Darkness whispered.

“... Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I am. I’ll make you lighter by any means possible, even if I end up stripping you naked, then after that I’ll lift you up and run away.”

...

“Ah, High-Earner Satou Kazuma-san, yes? Please come with me... Ah, he ran away! Even Lady Dustiness who was responsible for his capture is running away!?”

Together with Darkness, we broke out of the encirclement formed by the guild workers.

“Aah, I ran away... I ran away to protect my own modesty... Even though it’s my job to make sure this guy pays his taxes even at the cost of my life...”

Darkness whimpered, her face on the verge of tears, as she ran beside me, tossing away her weights as she went.

I’m really impressed that she is able to run while wearing that many weights.

“Hey, stop moping around and let’s go! I can’t believe you tossed away the key to the handcuffs in the mansion’s yard before you left! Are you an idiot? We’re heading out of town.”

“... I’m well aware of your high luck. If I had the key on me, I get the feeling that you’ll easily be able to steal it... Anyway, there’s already people posted at the gates, so you should give up on that plan. Why don’t you just stop struggling? I think you are much more manly now that you are rich than when you were being ridden with debts.”

“Shut up, I don’t need to hear that from you!”

With Darkness chained to me, we snuck through the back alleys.

We stand out a lot like this.

There’s no way we could possibly use the main streets.

In the first place, most of the adventurers arrived fully armed. They were summoned with an emergency announcement, after all.

When they are dressed like this, anyone would be able to easily identify them at a glance.

Damn those guild workers and tax collectors. They sure thought this through.

Why did I even come back to this town? God damn it!

Though, it's really more like I was sent back, but...!

You better remember this, white suit! And wait for me, my little sister...!

Ah, I want to see Iris.

Why do I have to scurry around this heartless town while chained to this woman?

For now, I need to find somewhere to hide in and buy some time.

I wonder if Aqua managed to escape successfully.

Megumin's probably relaxing back at the guild right now.

And this girl is...

"Ha..."

While I was thinking about such matters, Darkness let out a tired sigh and squatted down, acting as though she was too tired to move.

"Hey, aren't you the iron lady who's so proud of her own stamina? There's no way you could be worn out after just running such a short distance, stop messing around and stand up."

"Who are you calling an iron lady? ... Lalatina-sama is a dainty lady. She can't walk anymore. Hmph!"

Darkness whined in a sickeningly sweet tone that I've never heard her use before. I roughly pulled on the chain connecting the two of us.

"... I'll stand up and run properly. So pull hard on my chain again, just like you're planning to drag me off... When the cuff bites into my wrist..."

"E-Even at a time like this, you..."

Looking at Darkness blushing and fidgeting before me, I had half a mind to just give up and pay my taxes. Then-

“I found them! Over there! Lady Dustiness has him restrained! That man is the perverted brute of Axel! Send for more people! Don’t let him escape!”

I heard a shout echoing from some distance away.

“Ah, dammit! Let’s go Darkness! Don’t you dare hold me back! If you start doing anything funny, I’ll use Steal on you!”

After hearing such a warning...

“... Ka-Kazuma, after imagining you exposing me in front of such a large crowd, I’m starting to feel like it might not be a bad experience. Am I really hopeless?”

“Yes, you are! You’ve been hopeless since the day we met!”

The tax collectors swarmed towards us!

—The time’s probably around evening.

It’s almost time for civil servants to be getting off work.

Right now, I’m sitting on a cold, stone floor.

And, opposite me, Darkness is sitting atop a soft, cushioned chair with a dejected expression

In a soft voice, she said.

“... You sly bastard...”

I’m fine with being a sly bastard.

“I’ll be happier if you just honestly told me that I’m smart.”

“You bastard! How could you use such underhanded means? Normally people would just think of a way to escape from the town... What should I do? If word of this gets out, the other nobles will end up resorting to the same thing when they are unable to escape in time.”

Darkness angrily said.

“That’s a problem for the state... In the first place, you should’ve just used your position to push through some new laws to patch these loopholes. That would’ve solved things handily.”

I said to Darkness as I hugged my knees.

Currently, we are held in the safest place in the entire town.

The highest authority in the town, and the ally of law abiding citizens that detains criminals in the name of justice.

Yes, we are in the detention cells of the police station.

“Different departments of the government don’t get along with each other. This is a given no matter what country you go to.”

“You sly bastard! You sly bastard! Damn you!”

While we were chased by the tax collectors, I burst into the nearest police station and used steal on a random female policeman.

The charge is theft and public indecency.

I’ll leave what I stole to your imagination.

“Uuu... How could those policemen be so hard headed... They are funded through tax money too... They happily handed over the handcuffs when I asked for them, so why are they so inflexible now...? And you! Just the other day, you called the police on Aqua in order to get back into the house, and now you’re purposefully committing a petty crime in order to escape the tax collectors! Just what are you...!”

Darkness lamented with an anguished expression.

“Ah, it’s really fortunate that I’m chained together with you. Thanks to you, it seems like we’ll be able to return home by tonight.”

“Shut up!”

After I was arrested, I was thrown into the cells despite the tax collector’s protests.

The tax collectors and the police had a long discussion afterwards, but in the end the police refused to hand me over.

I don't know if it's because of Darkness's presence, or just because I'm a first time offender, but they told me that I'll be released after the interrogation..

The interrogation is already over, and now they are just dealing with the paperwork.

Thanks to that, it looks like I'll be able to go home by tonight.

Due to the fact that we were handcuffed together, even though she isn't a criminal, Darkness had no choice but to be locked up in the cells together with me. Well, they did give her a chair to sit on, but still.

Time passes, and soon the sun has set beyond the horizon.

A voice called out to Darkness and I.

"Get out, you're getting released. I'll be sending you home... My apologies for troubling Lady Dustiness so. Please, come this way."

"I'm home... What, you didn't manage to escape, Aqua?"

The moment Darkness and I entered the mansion, we're greeted by the sight of Aqua sobbing into the sofa, while Megumin tried to comfort her.

After I went out of my way to tell her about the surefire way to escape that only she could use.

"Ah, welcome back, Kazuma. No, it seemed like she managed to avoid capture until the time limit, but..."

Megumin said with troubled expression as she gently petted Aqua on the head.

Aqua muttered between sobs.

“Uuu... uu... I did as Kazuma suggested and headed for the water purification plant... but I got discovered on the way there... I had no choice but to jump into the small pool they use for agriculture... Then... Then!”

The method I taught her was to dive into the main reservoir at the town’s water purification plant and remain submerged until evening.

Aqua’s a goddess of water after all, she can breathe underwater and wouldn’t feel uncomfortable.

I thought no one would be able to lay a hand on her if she’s submerged in the main reservoir.

“From what I’ve heard, the tax collectors tried to force her out by bombarding the pool with fire magic to boil her out. Fortunately, the sun set before they managed to do so, but Aqua seems to be really shaken by it. She’s been crying non stop...”

The tax collectors in this country sure are merciless.

... I thought it was a pretty good plan, but did I unintentionally do more harm than good?

“... Oh? You still haven’t unlocked that handcuff connecting the both of you?”

Megumin said while looking at our hands.

True, this handcuff was originally borrowed from the police station.

I tried to get them to unlock it as we were released from the police station, but...

“To prevent a criminal from easily freeing themselves if they get their hands on a key, each set of handcuffs has a unique key... And the key to this one is...”

Darkness muttered shyly before trailing off. As she did so, I continued.

“Somewhere out in the yard because of this idiot. She didn’t want me to be able to easily steal it, and she doesn’t remember where she threw the key. When it’s this dark out, even with my night vision, there’s no way I would be able to find a small key hidden somewhere out in the middle of the yard. There’s no choice but to wait til tomorrow morning and get her to look for it.”

“... Oh, does that mean that the two of you will have to take a bath together, go to the toilet together, and sleep together tonight? How nice.”

Megumin said that...

Said... that...

....

“ ... ”

Darkness and I silently stared at each other.

Chapter 3: Bringing these feelings to a close

A constant clacking noise filled my ears.

As clumsy as Darkness is, she usually elegantly eats her meals without making a sound.

I don't know if it's because Darkness is nervous or something else, but she was being uncharacteristically noisy with her cutlery.

Currently, we are in the middle of dinner.

"Kazuma-san, could you pass the soy sauce?"

"Ah, sure..."

I picked up the bottle with my left hand and was about to pass it to Aqua when...

"Ah!"

Darkness' cry reminded me that my left hand was still chained to her right.

When I passed the soy sauce over to Aqua, Darkness's hand was also dragged along with mine.

"Ah, sorry..."

"N-no, it's fine..."

Hearing my apology, Darkness replied in a soft voice.

"Thanks."

Aqua paid no heed to our situation, simply thanking me as she received the soy sauce.

She had been crying all evening after being traumatised by the tax collectors, but by now there's almost no trace of any of that ever happening.

From the way she dug into her meal, it's almost like she's forgotten about that incident entirely.

I almost envy how quickly she is able to regain her usual demeanour.

If she was the one who was chained to me...

"...I-I'm full..."

Perhaps due to her nervousness, Darkness softly said that after eating only a small portion of her meal, a slight blush playing on her face.

Megumin responded to Darkness.

"...What are the two are you so nervous for? We've known each other for quite some time, haven't we? After becoming such close friends, what's the big deal with sleeping together? If you are worried about being alone, Aqua and I can join you as well. It'd be good to have all four of us sleeping together, wouldn't it?"

"P-Please do..."

Without realizing it, Darkness and I both answered at the same time.

Hearing that, Darkness raised an eyebrow.

"...Hey, as a woman, it's acceptable for me to want Megumin to accompany me... but what excuse would a man like you have for wanting the same thing? At the end of the day, I'm still a lady, so hearing that doesn't sit well with me."

In response to Darkness who said such a bothersome thing,

"No, I know there's no way I could get anything out of sleeping with you. I too would like Megumin and Aqua to be around to avoid any unnecessary misunderstandings. Knowing your personality, you'll probably end up hugging me in your sleep and I'll end up waking up with broken ribs."

"W-What are you saying!? What kind of world would a person capable of doing that in her sleep even exist in?"

Rather than spending the night being too tense to sleep, I would rather have Aqua and Megumin join us.

After all, the four of us have slept together while travelling, and Aqua has even slept in the same stall with me back when we were living in the stables. The four of us sleeping together now isn't a big deal.

“Oh, speaking of which, I think this would be the first time the four of us spent the night in the same room in this mansion. How about I entertain you all with some ghost stories before we go to bed?”

“N-no, I think I’ll pass on that...”

“Y-Yeah, this place used to be haunted, you know? It’s best not to talk about ghost stories in a place like this.”

Thinking back on the chaos caused by the evil spirits when we first moved in, Megumin and I shuddered.

...Then.

“Seriously, you call yourselves adventures yet you’re scared of a few ghost stories? It’s no wonder we’ve been receiving petitions about adventurers becoming cowards lately. I really wish you guys would straighten up.”

Darkness exasperatedly said that.

...Hmm...

“...Come to think of it, you’ve been saying that the adventurers have all gotten lazy recently... And petitions? Oh yeah, your house is currently ruling over this town, right?”

In response to my question, Darkness said.

“I’m sure you’re aware of the situation. Now that the adventurers in this town have gotten rich, they’ve become unwilling to take on quests. We’ve managed to clear the quests that were piled up somehow, but they won’t change their behaviour that easily. Even now, the number of monsters close to the town have been steadily increasing. But with this, everyone will want to work a little harder-”

“Wait, hold on. Are you saying that this situation is because all the adventurers in this town became NEETs? Then, the reason that this emergency summon is the first time any of us heard about having to pay taxes after being exempted for so long is because...”

Darkness chuckled.

“Seems like you understand. It’d be a different story if they continued to protect the town as they did before, but there’s no need to extend any special considerations to a bunch of NEETs. This special operation is to

both raise funds and deal with the NEETs in this town. The guild workers should be quite pleased with this. We've managed to increase tax revenue, and we've also lit a fire under the adventurers who've been living a leisurely lifestyle. I'm sure the population of monsters around the town will decrease from now on. But don't worry, the money we got from the adventurers will all be used on the adventurers—"

"Hold on a minute!"

I abruptly stood up, pulling on the chain connecting us both.

Of course, Darkness was dragged up to her feet along with me.

"What, are you saying that I got chased around the town for half a day for such a stupid reason? To kick all these newly rich and lazy adventurers back into gear?"

Even if I was let off lightly for being a first time offender, I still ended up getting arrested. And to think that the person who caused me to become a criminal is standing right in front of me...

"Nonsense! What do you mean by stupid? Labour and taxes are the duty of the citizens in this country! What's wrong with collecting the taxes that we are owed from people who refuse to work? This country does not need NEETs! Those who can work but refuse to should be thrown out with the garbage!"

"There's a party member denying the life I've led up till this point!"

Darkness and I started grappling with each other. Seeing the two of us quarrelling, Megumin said in an exasperated voice.

"... It doesn't seem likely for anything to happen between you two, so I think I'll let you sleep alone tonight. And while you're at it, take this chance to bond a little."

What comes after dinner would obviously be...

Yes, of course, it'd be to take a bath. Such is customary for all Japanese.

“Stop fooling around! Japanese need to take a bath every day or they’ll shrivel up and die! I’m not like you fancy bath-hating nobles who would rather try and cover up their body odor with perfumes! If you understand that, then stop getting in my way!”

“Wha-What are you saying! Even us nobles would take a bath every day! Just what country do such bath-hating nobles exist in?! ... It’s just, considering our situation, I think it’d be better to forgo a bath and instead wipe our bodies down...”

Darkness strongly objected to my comments.

“After working up such a sweat running across half the town, I really will die if I don’t take a bath! It’s not like I’m asking you to join me, go ahead and wipe yourself off with a wet towel or something while I soak in the tub.”

“N-no, taking a bath means you’ll be naked... While I’m wiping myself off in a half-naked state, you’ll be fully naked...”

While we were arguing...

“It’s my turn! Magic Card: Swamp Magic. With this, Aqua’s monsters will not be able to take action for three turns.”

“...Uuu, I can’t do anything again. Pass.”

Megumin and Aqua ignored our squabble and were playing a card game on the table in the living room.

They’ve long given up on stopping us.

“I don’t really mind you seeing my naked body, so it’s fine. In fact, it’d be a reward in some ways, so you need not mind.”

“I’m saying I mind! What’s with that shameless personality of yours? Why don’t you try considering what I would feel when I see your naked body?”

“My turn. Magic Card: Explosion. My opponent instantly disintegrates.”

“Waah! Megumin, you’re really abusing those spell cards! This is the third time I’ve lost without being able to do anything!”

Ignoring the two who were playing without a care in the world, I took the still protesting Darkness and moved to the bathroom with a change of clothes.

I already prepared the bath in advance while Aqua and Megumin were making dinner..

I quickly moved to remove my clothes...

“... What do I do about this? I can’t remove my shirt while I’m still handcuffed... Let’s just cut it. This shirt is pretty worn out anyway.”

Saying that, I cut the shirt that I was about to throw away with a dagger.

“... Do you really not care about stripping naked while I’m still next to you?”

Ignoring Darkness’s protests, I stripped down such that the only thing I was wearing were the handcuffs and a towel.

Darkness on the other hand only took a small towel with her and walked into the bathroom barefoot.

It seems like she was intent on simply wiping herself off while I soaked.

I cheerfully entered the bathroom, and Darkness shyly followed behind me.

Darkness sat back to back with me as I started washing my body before getting into the bath. While still wearing her shirt and dress, she submerged her towel and shyly moved it under her shirt to begin wiping herself off.

I quickly washed myself off and moved to the bathtub.

Of course, Darkness, who was handcuffed to me, was forced to follow along.

“Aah... It’s like all the troubles I went through today are being washed away. I almost can’t believe this...”

“... To boldly expose your naked body in front of a young noble maiden... No, there’s really nothing more I can say about your behaviour.”

Darkness sat on the wet edge of the bathtub, and submerged her chained right hand into the bath water.

She moved her right hand in the bathtub like she was stirring a pot of water.

“Do you think the adventurers will hate me?”

She sighed deeply.

“... Who knows? In the first place, nobody knows that this was carried out on your orders, right? Plus they were exempt them from taxes for all this time, so I doubt they'll end up hating you that much. Then again, I did manage to escape, so maybe I'm not one to say.”

Hearing the reply I gave as I was lounging in the bath, Darkness signed in resignation.

“... I didn't want to resort to doing this either. But to be honest, the finances of this country are in a bad enough shape that we have to resort to borrowing money from Elroad. The money that we took from them today will eventually find their way back to them many fold... If the adventurers took their jobs more seriously, I wouldn't be doing this either...”

How unreasonable.

“You say that labour is a duty, but what's wrong with not working after securing enough money to live comfortably? The work of an adventurer is extremely hazardous, you know? There exist a similar sentiment in my country that taxes and labour is the duty of the citizens, but even then there are a lot of folks like me who choose to become a NEET. Can't you at least give us the freedom to choose what jobs we want?”

“I'm surprised your country hasn't yet fallen to ruin like that... How should I put this, there's a form of entertainment called manga where you come from, no? I recall you saying something like 'if you have a talent for art, you can earn a living simply by drawing manga' every so often... So, say there's someone who draws manga. Then, suppose he ends up extremely rich by selling his manga. If that person were to say that he doesn't care about completing his manga now that he has enough money to live comfortably for the rest of his life, wouldn't that be a problem?”

... Of course it would.

... It would be a very big problem.

I won't name names, but there are plenty of works whose status are in peril because of such people.

“There is a responsibility that comes with every job. This is the town of beginners. In order to help new adventurers find their footing, there are a lot of facilities in this town designed to aid them. They are given special treatment under the expectation that they'll continue to protect the people

and the country. Journeyman and veteran adventurers still keep their responsibilities in mind even if they become rich, but the beginners in this town are a little... I don't know why, but there's a strange school of thought that has taken root amongst the adventurers in this town."

...?

"And that is?"

I casually asked while leisurely stretching my legs in the bath.

"Ah, for some reasons, stupid sayings like 'If you work, you lose' have been really popular amongst the adventurers of this town as of late."

"..."

I think I have an idea of who exactly spread such sayings.

"...What's wrong? Why have you gone silent? Seems like you have an idea of why this happened. So, do you have anything to say? Why don't you share them with me?"

"...No, I don't..."

That's the exact same phrase that I've been sharing to the other other adventurers as of late.

After coming out of the bath, the first thing we saw was a crying Aqua clinging on to Megumin.

"One more round! This will be the last one, so give me one more round!"

"I don't want to. It'll be the same no matter how many times you try. You're no match for me. So, as promised, I'll have you do a favour for me, okay?"

Seems like she was utterly trashed in the card game..

It's pretty safe to say that Megumin is the undefeated champion at strategy games like chess and cards.

As expected of the Crimson Demons who are famed for their intelligence, though I still wish she would put it to more practical purposes.

“Well, it’s still early, but let’s go to sleep. That way we can wake up early tomorrow and go hunt for that key. Hopefully we’ll find it before we need to use the bathroom in the morning.”

“... S-sounds good.”

Darkness agreed blushing.

We just had a bathroom break, but to prevent me from hearing anything, Darkness made me sing very loudly.

I feel like Megumin made me do something like this too back when the mansion was still infested with spirits.

I insisted that Darkness sing a song herself if she wanted privacy so badly, but I ended up singing anyway.

Because I felt that her request was highly unreasonable, I paused erratically as I sang to mess with her. In return, she stood wordlessly behind my back and shook my shoulder when I did my business.

And just as expected, we ended up fighting again afterwards. I’ve had enough of going through stupid things like this.

Let’s just go to bed early tonight and search for the key early next morning before we have to use the toilet.

“Well, we’re going to bed now. Are you sure you don’t want to join us, Aqua? Megumin?”

“The two of you can sleep alone tonight. Judging from how you were acting a while ago, it doesn’t seem like any kind of accidents will occur. Actually, it’d be better if you two could improve your relationship to the point where those kinds of accidents might occur. It’s about time you two acted more like adults.”

Megumin said with a disapproving expression, as though she was tired of our constant squabbling.

My heart skipped a beat after hearing her use the word adult. Could that be a sign to my inner chaos?

Is Megumin really okay with this? Weren't we supposed to be more than friends now?

... Looking at Darkness next to me, it seems like I wasn't the only one who was thinking too much.

From the way she was blushing, Darkness is probably imagining some kind of nasty scenario again. I interrupted her thoughts by giving the handcuff a sharp tug and rushed off towards the bedroom.

By the way, because of the handcuff around my left wrist, I couldn't put on a shirt.

So I'm currently half naked.

It's warm in the mansion, so I shouldn't have to worry about catching a cold if I wrap myself up properly with the blanket.

Naturally, I'm sleeping in my own bedroom.

Because my left hand is cuffed to Darkness's right, I have to take the right half of the bed.

I collapsed onto the bed as soon as I went in.

"...Don't you make any moves on me just because you can see my bare sexy chest."

"As if I would! You're the king of sexual harassment. I should be the one worrying about you trying to rub yourself all over me."

I turned my back on the insecure Darkness and said,

"G'night."

"Hey! What? Are really just gonna go to sleep like that? ...Y-you're... really sleeping?"

Hearing those words from Darkness, I pulled the blanket over my head.

... How long have I been asleep for?

I seemed to have turned over sometime in my sleep, so now I'm face to face with Darkness.

The moment I opened my eyes, Darkness' stern, sleeping face filled my vision.

My forehead was pressing against hers.

Her face was inches before my eyes.

... Actually.

"... What were you trying to do?"

"!?"

I casually asked Darkness who had pushed herself so close to me.

Darkness' body twitched after hearing my words, but her eyes remained closed.

"...Zzzzzzzzz.....ZZzzzzzzz....."

"Hey, stop pretending to sleep. You just... "

As I spoke, I felt something off about my neck. I touched it with my right hand...

For some reason, it's damp.

That means...!

"You...! You licked my neck!? You licked my neck and did things to my body while I was asleep, didn't you!?"

"N-no! You're wrong! I didn't go that far! Really, I didn't! It's really not like that!"

In response, Darkness jumped up, her face instantly blushing as tears started to form in her eyes.

Still rubbing my damp neck, I said,

“What do you mean ‘You’re wrong’? Won’t you explain how my neck got wet then!? I know your hormones are raging, but never thought you would try something like this on my defenceless body while I slept...!”

Darkness furiously signalled for me to keep quiet by pressing her finger against her lips,

“Y-you’re being too loud! No...! I really didn’t do anything! Um, I woke up to find my face buried in your neck! Then, my drool inadvertently dripped onto it...! I thought I should wipe it off, but when I see you chained to me with such a defenseless sleeping face... For some reasons, a strong wave of shame and guilt washed over me... then I got increasingly aroused and...!”



So she was indeed about to do things to me.

I sat up and checked my body.

“... Oh, my belt is still there ... You really didn’t do anything...”

“Wh-why do you sound like you’re a little disappointed...”

I don’t know what got her so aroused, but her skin had a visibly reddened sheen and her breaths were shallow.

“... I knew you were a huge pervert with an extremely erotic body, but I didn’t expect you to actually try something on me at night. You were also planning on going all the way with me back when you tried to drug me, didn’t you? Maybe I should really start calling you Slutiness.”

“D-don’t do that...! ...Un...Uuu! ...M-my heart started racing after being scolded and called a pervert and slut by you... Am I really hopeless...?”

“You’re worrying about that now? You’ve been hopeless since the day we met.”

As I talked, I tidied up the messy blankets and carefully laid back down.

Though she still seemed to be embarrassed, Darkness followed suit.

“... Thinking back, when I first met you, I didn’t think I’d ever be in a position to chat about such crude topics with you. I was a woman of fewer words back then, even worse at socializing than I am currently... Furthermore, I was also more actively trying to keep my distance from you...”

In this silent and dimly lit room.

Darkness said those things to me.

“Well, you are a Lady; you were most likely forbidden from getting close to anyone... From my first impression, you were more stern and quiet; someone who would never lecture me—and of course—would never fight with me. Even though you were lewd and had some strange attributes, the past you still came across as being more mature...”

Hearing me talk to the ceiling, Darkness couldn’t help but giggle.

“My first impression was that you are a little dishonest, yet diligent; someone who stays away from shady businesses, a reliable, determined and gentle person.”

She turned to me on the bed and talked to my cheek.

“For some reason, I feel like you’re making it sound as if I’m actually a brute of a man who’s no longer diligent, determined or reliable and would readily get involved in shady businesses.”

“That is exactly what I meant...?”

Darkness laughed again.

“... Say, Kazuma,”

She said in the same tone she would use when trading small talk with someone.

“?”

I turned my head towards Darkness.

“... Do you like Megumin?”

It must have been cloudy outside..

Even though there should be a full moon tonight, very little light made it through the windows.

Possibly from the lack of light, I couldn’t clearly make out Darkness’ expression.

However...

“... S-sorry, did I ask something strange?.”

I could still sense the slight redness on Darkness’ smooth skin as she bashfully said.

If you suddenly spring such a question on me...

“Well, there’s no way I can hate her, so, yeah, I do like her. Of course, I like Aqua and you too.”

When I finished, the mood took an abrupt dip.

“... You’re saying that you like me... not as a lover... but as a friend, right?”

In the pitch black room, Darkness muttered to herself in a voice tinged with loneliness.

... Eh, what’s going on?

I have a bad feeling about where this is going.

A very bad feeling, in fact.

Even a virgin like me who’s never dated a girl before can tell.

I shouldn’t let this conversation go on.

It definitely will not end well.

What the hell is happening? I’m a virgin who hasn’t even seen a pair of naked breasts before. First Megumin, and now this. How did things end up like this?

How could this happen? I’m a guy who has never even kissed a girl before, so why am I facing these kind of chad-like situations?

As I anxiously contemplated how I should answer her question, Darkness gently tugged on the cuffs on her right wrist.

It was only a quick, light tug.

Of course, my chained left hand naturally followed.

“Say... you like Megumin... romantically, right?”

As she spoke, Darkness held my left hand with both of hers.

I took in the soft and warm sensation of her touch.

At the same time, I frantically searched for a suitable answer.

The relationship Megumin and I have is one that is more than friends, but not yet lovers.

This is supposed to be a secret to the other two, but Darkness probably sensed it.

... She sensed that my attitude towards Megumin changed...

"... I-I don't know. To be honest, I don't really understand it myself. However, I definitely don't dislike her. I guess you could say I like her romantically. Just being with her makes me feel at ease... How should I put this... When I'm with her—for some reason—I just feel like I can relax."

Without much thought, I blurted out such things.

That was probably how I truly felt.

I don't normally pay attention to it, but I know. Every time she pokes a little fun at me, every time we accomplish something big, she takes up a little more of my heart.

Staring straight at each other in this dimly lit room, I told all my thoughts to her word-for-word.

Why did I do that?

I'm not even sure how I managed to convey all that to her without stuttering.

I just laid it out as it were.

"... I see."

She whispered only that short phrase in response, then gently placed my hand back onto my chest.

With that, Darkness turned her back on me.

.....

After that, Darkness just silently lied there.

... Just when I feel like saying 'Hey, come on and say something',

"Everything's pretty great as it is."

Darkness said that.

What does she mean?

Before I could ask—

“... Everything’s pretty great as it is. Aqua makes a mistake and won’t stop wailing, you then go ‘where would you be without me’ and babysit her. Megumin breaks something with her magic, you proceed to go apologize with her. I spit out something stupid, and you then come lecture me...”

Darkness started a perplexing monologue with her back still faced to me.

“Packing lunch for everyone as we accompany Megumin on her daily trip to somewhere like a lake as you did this morning. I start arguing with you over pointless matters. Then Aqua suddenly wants to go travel somewhere. Hearing that, you complain while at the same time formulating an itinerary for everyone in your mind...”

Darkness’ voice began to tremble slightly.

“Then, every now and then, you agree to go on a vacation, yet at the destination, something else would make it all go south...”

I reached for Darkness’ shoulder.

“H-Hey, what’s wrong? Calm down.”

I said as I tried to turn her over.

“... But, if you got together with someone, everything would be different. There’d be no way things will remain like this... Why can’t we just stay like this? Forever like this... To pay back the debt, you use everything you have up your sleeve to raise the money... and encounter some unexpected, powerful enemy in the process, with everyone barely making it out alive in the end... Why can’t just keep things as they are?”

But Darkness adamantly refused to turn around, instead continuing with her monologue.

... Then.

“You want a lover, right? ...Does that really have to be Megumin?”

With her back still towards me, Darkness said in a soft voice.

“N-no... it’s not that I want a lover...”

My words caught in my throat.

“If you simply want a woman to screw... Can’t I be that woman? I can go along with anything you wish, no matter what it is, I’ll endure it.”

What is this idiot saying?

“Are you making fun of me? I can get mad too, you know? It’s not like that, it’s... um...”

The words caught in my throat once again.

What do I really want?

...I noticed Darkness’ shoulder trembling.

“... You’re really acting weird today. Really, what’s wrong? Come on, let’s just go to sleep. Sleep, and we can deal with this tomorrow....”

Before I could finish.

Darkness suddenly turned around.

“...Uuuu-”

Her face made me gasp in surprise.

She’s crying.

Tears streamed out from Darkness’ eyes.

Darkness tightly gripped the hand I placed on her shoulder.

“Why can’t I work...? Wh-why can’t I w-work ...?”

She said amidst tears.

I kept my hand on Darkness' shoulder as she cried like a little child. Try as I might, but I just couldn't say anything.

Who knows how long we remained like this.

After composing herself, Darkness lightly pulled my hand off her shoulder.

"... Well, that was unsightly."

Still sobbing, Darkness shyly said at a volume barely above a whisper while looking at me with bloodshot eyes.

How should I even handle this kind of situation? Dealing with a crying girl is way out of my league.

And this is completely different from the kind of crying Aqua did every day.

I just couldn't find anything to say.

In the first place, I didn't even fully understand why she started suddenly crying. It's probably why I'm still a virgin.

Darkness stared at me intently with her puffy eyes.

She's waiting for me to speak.

Just what should I say?

I could only mutely stare at her in panic. Head drooped low, Darkness continued with her monologue.

"... Back then, I was already taken by that Lord. But you saved me from his clutches. You saved me and gave me freedom... So now all I wish is to be able to protect you, to provide you a blissful life. As long as everyone can live on like this, I'm satis..."

...

"So you would sacrifice yourself? Are you stupid? It's the same thing you tried with Alderp! Don't just solve every problem by sacrificing yourself! Don't misjudge me, Darkness! I'm not someone who seeks a lover just to do those things, nor am I the kind of person who's fine with anyone as long as they are willing to become my lover... Um... Megumin confessed to me a quite while ago. Ever since then I, slowly, without me noticing... started to

pay more and more attention to her. Eventually, I thought... ah, so I love Megumin too... It's something I only recently realized... ”

I don't even know what I wanted to say. Darkness kept her head down and listened silently.

“... I also...”

Her head still kept low,

“... I like you too.”

She suddenly said that...

Even though I knew at the back of my head that it was coming, I let out a confused gasp.

“... At first, I simply had the hunch that you were the type of guy I'd like... You... being average-looking, perverted, and seeming to be the kind of trash who only wants a lazy life without doing anything of value. Reluctant to work, and drinking from dawn to midnight, and eventually coming down with a mountain of debt... hehe.”

Oh, right, her type was those delinquents with no redeeming qualities.

At the very least, I can tell that this isn't a compliment.

“Don't forget that you played a part in landing me into debt too.”

Darkness then chuckled and said,

“Then, should I pay back those debts with my body?”

“Sorry, I'll never say things like that again, sorry.”

Seeing me instantly regret my stupidity, Darkness couldn't help but laugh aloud.

She then continued with her head turned down,

“... Every time I see you face against all kinds of powerful enemies and come out victorious, it always makes me feel energetic and refreshed. That magic sword user who was stronger and more experienced than you. The Demon Generals who were stronger than you by orders of magnitude. If I start counting the number of times you've exceeded my expectations, it'll

never end... When you tossed money at that corrupt Lord's face, I became truly obsessed with you."

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I guess that counts as a compliment.

"... You might have been hopeless initially, but you changed quickly. No matter who what enemy you faced, you, who has the weakest job, with no particularly powerful equipment to back you up. With just a basic bow and a strangely named sword, yet with just these you were able to overcome any obstacle, no matter how impossible they seemed. Then, before we realized it, you've managed to clear that astronomical debt..."

Just hearing Darkness' words made me feel many times more confident in my strength; it's unbelievable.

"I don't know when it happened, but you eventually slipped outside of my strike zone. Although you have been lazing around doing nothing of importance and drinking all day recently... I don't know when, but you no longer feel like the sort of trashy man that I liked."

What's happening?

"... I like you. At first because you were scummy and I liked scumbags, so it was a perfect fit. However, as time went on... my type shifted to just you. No matter what you turn into, I would always like you."

What's happening? This is bad.

I'm glad.

I'm really very happy.

"... I like you... yet you say that you love Megumin. Even then, I still like you... and Megumin. Aqua, too. I feared that the things I just said would destroy the harmony within our party, so I was originally going to keep them to myself, but..."

Darkness lifted her head.

And said while staring directly at me...

"What Megumin's mother said the other day... Megumin phrased it like this, right? Wanting to become more than friends?"

... With her tear-stained, puffed up eyes.

Her face glistened with wet trails.

“It seems like I’m a weak woman after all. Even though I like Megumin too... It hurts whenever I consider that she might take you away from me.”

She looked like a scared little girl, almost as if she was afraid that she was about to lose something important.

“... Kazuma... Will I... really... not work...?”

She asked with a stutter, as if she’s afraid of hearing my answer.

Ah, this is bad.

I’m overjoyed.

I couldn’t believe that Darkness actually confessed to me. That makes me really happy.

... But while I’m overjoyed.

My heart still hurts like hell.

“Darkness... um... “

My chest hurts.

It really hurts.

“Darkness, I don’t hate you. Looking back, this is the first time an older girl as beautiful as you has confessed to me.”

It hurts.

The more I talk, the more it hurts.

Damn, why can’t this world be like those eroges?

I tried to suppress the tear-jerking pain while staring at Darkness’ teary, upward-pointed face point-blank.

“... I never came close to anything like romance in the country I’m from. Back then, I’ve always felt that I’d probably end up being single forever...

that I'd probably never get the chance to chat properly with a girl... And here you are telling me that you like me for who I am. How could I not be happy?"

Darkness gazed at me anxiously, trying to see through me and get my true intentions.

... My heart hurts, it hurts so bad that I might burst into tears.

Just like in light novels, in games.

Like in harem manga.

"... But... I'm sorry. I already have someone in my heart. I'm not thick-skinned enough that I can go 'I love you too' under this circumstance, and I'm not experienced enough to be able to go out with two girls simultaneously. I'm not that trashy of a person. I can't be with you."

If I'm in an alternate world, it'd be great if I could go for polygamy.

Arriving at a happy ending without needing to choose would be great.

But these thoughts are nothing but empty wishes.

Darkness closed her eyes and looked back down—

—I wonder how long we spent in silence.

Finally, Darkness spoke up,

"...Thank you for answering me honestly... Sorry for all the trouble."

While saying that...

Darkness pushed herself up and smiled with relief.

It was the familiar, confident smile.

A smile that's both gentle and resolute.

As if her worries have dissipated, Darkness brushed her forelocks aside and stood up. With a refreshed face, she brought her hands to her waist.

Then, she gracefully flashed me that confident smile of hers again.

Before turning away cleanly and showing me her back.

“... Then I’ll be leaving, Kazuma. See you tomorrow... Seems like I still like you after all. You could’ve simply went with the flow and deceived me, yet you still went out of your way to give me a clear answer... ”

Saying that, Darkness headed for the door...

Hey, wait...!

The chain clanged.

Perhaps because her brain overheated from what happened earlier, Darkness completely forgot that we’re still cuffed together. She tried to spit a cool one-liner to end it all then leave the room.

“Gahh!?”

Her right arm was violently yanked back by my left.

Pulling my upper body along, she spun around like a top before plummeting head-first onto the bed.

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I can’t tell if she’s hurt or not.

She simply stopped moving as soon as her face hit the bed.

“... Hey, are you okay...?”

In response, Darkness drooped her head low as to not let me see her face and kneeled on the carpet.

Then, she hid her face between her knees.

On a closer look, her shoulders are trembling slightly.

Then, I noticed that the small portion of her ears that were sticking out had turned cherry red, possibly out of embarrassment...

“... Pffft!”

“!?”

I just couldn't hold back my laughter any longer.

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Then, she hid her face between her knees.

On a closer look, her shoulders are trembling slightly.

Then, I noticed that the small portion of her ears that were sticking out had turned cherry red, possibly out of embarrassment...

“... Pffft!”

“!?”

I just couldn't hold back my laughter any longer.

“I'm going to kill you! I'll kill you then myself right after!”

“Just to get revived by Aqua in the morning, right? I get it! It's my bad for laughing at you! But I couldn't really help it. It's your fault too! How could I not laugh after seeing such a scene play out after a tense moment?”

We're currently in the middle of a midnight chained deathmatch.

“I was really serious! If a woman gathered her courage to confess, no matter how stupid she ends up looking, any man who laughs at her deserves to be killed! ...Ah, right, it's you we are talking about... If anyone would do something like that, it'd be you! Hey, at least let me hit you once!”

How unreasonable!

“You... But... Because...! You tried to leave with such a serious face... ! Pffft.... Hahaha...!”

“I am going to kill you!”

Remembering what just happened, Darkness lunged at me as I once again burst out into laughter.

“I-I'm sorry! I understand, I understand! I'm my fault! It's my fault for laughing at you! Just one punch! Would you forgive me if I took a hit from you!?”

Hearing my suggestion, Darkness lowered her fist.

“... I see. Stand still and close your eyes, then.”

She said while taking heavy breaths.

How scary.

This is really scary.

Damn, even from the monstrously strong Darkness, I could take at least one punch, right!?

I can take it...!

I can... probably take it...!

“Here goes. You’re prepared for this, right?”

Darkness audibly readied her stance before me as I held my eyes shut.

I resolved myself.

“B-bring it!”

As I said that, I felt something brush against my cheeks.

My body reflexively twitched in shock the moment I felt that, before I realized that it was Darkness’s hand, stroking my cheek.

The moment I did, something soft pressed against my lips.

“... !?”

Even though I’ve never been kissed before, I knew right away what touched me even with my eyes closed.

The moment I opened my eyes, I was presented with an angry-looking Darkness, yet blushing beet-red all the way to her ears, her left hand stroking my cheek.

Then, as she moved away from me, I briefly saw Darkness’ tongue stick out to lick the part of her lips that touched mine.

“You... You... !”

I feel like I should complain about this, but what do I even say?

Before I could find the right words, Darkness pulled my left arm over by the chain.

She grabbed my wrist and whispered into my ear,

“... I was going to quietly accept my defeat, but I’ve just changed my mind. I’m older than you and Megumin, also a noble. Starting tomorrow, I will adhere to my standards and respect your personal space. However, right now... “

After sending a chill down my spine with those words, she grabbed my hand and pushed me down onto the bed!

“Hey, wh-what’re you doing, Darkness!? Wait! No, this is bad! This is bad in every possible sense!”

As I was held down against the bed by Darkness, I thought about what to do in this situation.

Blushing furiously, Darkness panted and said,

“Don’t you always enjoy calling me Sluttiness or Lewdness? I’m always lewd-this lewd-that...! You’re right, I am lewd! I’ve already made up my mind! Forget about sleeping tonight, I’m playing with you till sunrise!”

“Alright I get it, please calm down. I-I don’t think losing our first times in this way is a very mature thing to do, so calm down-!?”

As I said that and tried to get up-

Darkness tightly gripped my left hand and pressed her body weight onto it, pinning it to the bedside.

Of course, that left my upper body spread wide open across the bed.

Keeping my left hand pinned to the bedside, she straddled onto my waist.

This isn’t good.

This position really isn’t good.

“No, wait, Darkness! Seriously, calm down! Stop, don’t do this-!”

As I continued trying to persuade her, Darkness panted heavily and rubbed my cheek with her left hand.

“I recall that you did this to me back at my home some time ago... Seems like the tables have turned tonight... !”

This is really bad. Really, don’t!

What's really bad about this? Well, my thing would do that.

"...? ...Ah?"

She probably noticed since she's straddled around my waist.

Darkness yelped in a soft voice, slightly abashed.

However, even though my thing did that, Darkness still had no intentions of getting off me.

No, don't be mesmerized! Don't get carried away by this H-game-esque scene.

Calm down, Satou Kazuma, do you intend to cheat on Megumin?

It was only yesterday!

I became more than friends with Megumin only yesterday!

If I let my body be swept along by this situation, I'll end up betraying Megumin who so bravely confessed her feelings last night...!

That's right, even though I have the excuse that 'Darkness forced herself upon me, so I couldn't resist'...!

Although Darkness appears to be somewhat embarrassed, she still pushed her face closer as she caressed my cheek with her left hand.

"D-don't do it! Don't do this, Darkness! Damn, how could this... ! Having only the weakest class, I can't possibly match the strength of a Crusader like you...!"

As I desperately screamed at Darkness, I used my free right hand to...!

... Free right hand?

"Hey, Darkness, my right hand! My right hand is free! If you don't restrain my right hand with your left soon, I'll retaliate! Be mindful, I have Drain Touch!"

"Eh? Ah...!"

Hearing my reminder, Darkness hastily took hold of my right wrist and pressed it down.

How could this have happened? Now both of my hands have been restrained.

Damn, I already have Megumin... how could she simply play with me as she wishes...!

I desperately struggled for my freedom against Darkness..

“... Hey, what happened, Darkness? Why did you stop?”

“... Eh? No-nothing, just, I used both of my hands to pin you down, so I don't know what to do next... “

Darkness said something silly as she kept both of my hands pinned.

“Idiot, what's that mouth of yours for!? I'm already half-naked! I'm totally defenceless against whatever you can do with your mouth right now!”

“Ah! R-right...”

Shakily, Darkness reached for my neck with her tongue out...!

...At this moment, perhaps Darkness got cold feet, her tongue hesitated mere centimetres away from my neck.

In response, I screamed at her in an anguished voice.

“Dammit, how could you tease me like this? Your name really checks out, Lewdness! But I'll never surrender to you! But please stop hesitating and get on with it!”

“A-alright! Then... here I come... !”

Saying that, Darkness started moving her tongue closer...

“Ah, wait a second! It's getting too cramped down there, so please unbuckle my belt! Remember, you have to say 'You might be saying that you don't like it, but your body doesn't lie...!' while you're doing that!”

“Ah, right, I understand...! You might be saying that you don't like it, but your body doesn't lie...!”

As she said it, Darkness let go of my wrists to unbuckle my pants with her hands...!

“Idiot, why did you let my hands go free!? Keep holding me down and don’t let me resist!”

“Ah! S-sorry!”

Hearing my harsh words, Darkness reflexively apologized.

“Just like that. Unfortunately, you’ll have to get off my body for a second. Approach me from the side as I’m lying down... Yes, like that. Then, use your right upper arm to press down on my left wrist, and then reach for my right wrist with your hand... That’s it. That way, your left hand is now free, see? Oh, and use your giant breasts to push my chest down so that I can’t get up...!”

“L-Like this...? Right, then I’ll reach down with my left hand to...!”

Following the instructions that I regretfully screamed, Darkness took hold of my belt as I helplessly laid there...!

“Ah! Ouch ouch ouch! Why the hell did you tighten it! You’re supposed to unbuckle it! Unbuckle my belt! Also, remember to say ‘Ufufu... that looks pretty painful...!’ while doing so!”

“A-ah, right! S-sorry for being so clumsy...! Fu... fufu, that looks pretty painful...! So far, I don’t remember hearing you say ‘no’ even once...!”

“Very nice, that was some great ad-libbing!”

Darkness’ left hand reached down and searched for my unprotected belt...

“Eh? What the?”

“Hey, hurry up! Go on! Don’t stop now! And remember, your mouth is free while you’re loosening my belt. Consider what your mouth can be doing to my defenceless, naked upper body...!”

Suddenly, the door flew open.

Standing on the other side of the door were a displeased-looking Megumin and a very tired Aqua.

Seeing them, I immediately screamed.

“Save me! This woman is about to violate me!”

“Ahhhh!?”

Using the key she had, Aqua unlocked the handcuffs with a click.

Aqua claims to have flawless vision in the dark, being able to see everything at night as clearly as she could in the day. With such an ability, she was able to find the key.

Apparently, Megumin woke Aqua up in the middle of the night and made her search for the keys that Darkness lost.

And why would she do that? Well...

“Man, you guys were really noisy... ! I told you two to get a little closer, not to start a fight in the middle of the night!”

Darkness was kneeling on the carpet as Megumin lectured her.

“... S-sorry...”

Megumin placed her hands on her hips.

Facing Megumin who towered over Darkness as she was kneeling, Darkness lowered her head.

“Hey, I’m really sleepy. I already worked hard to find the key, so can I go to bed now?”

Aqua could barely keep her eyes open. Megumin briefly thanked her, after which Aqua shakily waddled out of the room.

Now free from the handcuffs, I sat on the edge of my bed and dangled my legs as I listened to Megumin’s lecture.

To the Darkness who had her head lowered before Megumin, I said,

“Man, you really are something. Not only did you harass me during my sleep, but you even dared to do such things to me despite my ferocious resistance...!”

“Ah! You, you bastard...!”

Hearing me, Darkness turned to give me a harsh glare.

... And so did Megumin.

“...”

In the face of Megumin’s piercing gaze, I eventually broke down and went to kneel besides Darkness.

“... For some reason, I feel like I should kneel before you too.”

“Well, it’s good that you took the initiative.”

Hearing Megumin’s reply, Darkness smiled as if she was enjoying my plight.

... This little.

Looking at the two of us, Megumin let out a sigh.

“Seriously, and here I thought that letting the two of you stay together for the night will bring you a little closer... Darkness, did you tell him everything that you wanted to say?”

“!?”

Megumin’s question put a shocked expression on both of us.

Just how much did this girl know?

You really can’t underestimate the intelligence of Crimson Demons.

Seriously, why can’t you put this kind of intelligence to use in your daily life?

“Er... Um... Megumin, sorry... “

Still kneeling, Darkness mumbled.

Seeing that, Megumin said,

“Why are you apologizing? This isn’t a topic that I have any say in. You should value your own emotions more. After all, we are still not proper lovers yet. It’s not my place to say anything about who this indecisive man decides to go with. So, did you properly get everything off your chest?”

While saying something oddly mature, Megumin smiled gently at Darkness.

Hearing Megumin's words, Darkness raised her head and placed both her fists against her knees.

Seeing that, Megumin smiled.

The two of them looked like a child proudly reporting to her mother after she's done something by herself, and the mother smiling proudly in return.

Even though Megumin is the younger of the two.

Somehow, seeing Megumin act like this made my chest ache a little.

Could it be?

Did I want her to be at least a little jealous?

Perhaps it hurt me when she said that it isn't her place to say anything about who I choose to go with.

Just thinking that line made me feel like an annoying person.

As if sensing my muddled thoughts, Megumin gave me a smile that seemed to indicate that she knew everything that's going on in my head and said,

"Now's the time to show off how dependable you are. In order to not lose my affection, you should do more cool stuff like monster hunting more often."

Darkness nodded in agreement.

Even though Darkness said she liked men who are lazy wastrels.

Between the recent tax collection and this, just when did she have a change of heart?

I smiled wryly at the two and said,

"Guess I don't have much of a choice..."

Darkness and Megumin both smiled joyfully in response.

Then...

“Well, I don’t think it’s likely, but just to confirm, nothing happened between you two, right?”

Megumin asked, a hint of anxiety creeping into her voice.

... Hmm, could it be that she was a little jealous after all?

“No, thanks to this guy’s ferocious resistance, I wasn’t able to do anything.”

Darkness casually answered as she shot me a cheeky gaze.

Somehow, I feel like I’m being toyed with.

Looking at Megumin looking visibly relieved, and Darkness flashing me a victorious smile, I couldn’t help but say,

“... Oh, yeah, what was it that Darkness did when I had my eyes closed just now? Was it my first... what do you call it...?”

“!?”

Megumin’s face stiffened and Darkness buried hers between her legs.

Chapter 4 : A gesture of love for this orphanage!

Next morning.

Thanks to the events that took place last night, I ended up tossing and turning without getting even a wink of sleep.

“G-good morning, Kazuma. You sure are early today.”

I went to the kitchen to have breakfast only to meet a similarly sleep-deprived Darkness who gave me a lackluster greeting.

“I’m not up early. I just couldn’t sleep thanks to what you did last night. Why do you and Megumin keep teasing a teenage boy like me? Raising my hopes only to leave me hanging. Do you actually like me or do you just find it amusing to see me suffer?”

“Th-That’s... N-No, nevermind. What happened last night was my fault. I wasn’t thinking straight. To think that I had to be comforted by a girl that’s younger than me... I really failed as a noble... Please forget about what happened last night.”

Saying that, she regretfully lowered her head.

“How could I ever forget that? Not only was I handcuffed to an older noble lady, I got stripped half-naked and even got my first kiss forcibly stolen. That doesn’t exactly happen often, you know?”

“That’s not what I was referring to! No, wait, of course I want you to forget about that too!”

Darkness slammed on the table as she said that, her face blushing a bright red. Then, Aqua, who unusually was awake this early, came down the stairs and said,

“Why are you raising such a fuss this early in the morning? Are you excited because you spent a night with this man? You can’t lose control of yourself like this, Darkness. I know that you have some strange inclinations, but you should still respect yourself more.”

“That was too much, Aqua. But guess what, I know full well how things will progress for a man in this situation. From now on, I’ll have a raucous lifestyle where Darkness and Megumin both fight for my attention. Then, when you are left alone, you’ll end up feeling lonely and eventually realize what your true feelings are.”

With a mouthful of bread that she was having for breakfast, Aqua nodded along to my words and replied.

“That I should have acted sooner to fix this damn NEET?”

“No, of course not! You originally only thought of me as a housemate, but after this you’ll slowly realize that you actually have romantic feelings for me. But sorry, Aqua, I just can’t bring myself to see you as a romantic partner. I can only see you in the same way I see Emperor Zell or Chomusuke.”

“Hey, hold on a minute! Why do you make it sound like I was casually dumped?”

Towards the two of us who were bickering so early in the morning, Darkness, who was wearing her usual school teacher-like outfit, said.

“Hey, I’ll be coming back late tonight, so you don’t have to make my portion of dinner or wait for me. I’ll be staying over at my father’s place...”

Darkness said with a somewhat awkward expression before leaving the house.

... What’s with this atmosphere?

Could she be bothered by what happened last night?

Yeah, I did reject her after all. It’d be stranger if she wasn’t bothered by it...

... Right, I even had my first kiss.

It’s not like sharing the same bed or holding hands, I actually kissed a girl.

No, it still kind of feels like a middle schooler’s awkward romance.

But at the very least, I’ve crossed that line that separates men and boys.

“Hey, Kazuma, what’s wrong? You look much more slovenly than usual.”

Aqua rudely said as she looked at me with disgust.

“You are just as blind as usual. Take a good look. This is the face of a harem owner.”

“Your bed head is really amazing, isn’t it, Kazuma-san?”

Oh, by the way...

“If you’re free, do you want to visit the adventurer’s guild? You don’t have any plans today, right?”

I have an inexplicable urge to visit the adventurer’s guild today.

Then, well, I won’t name anyone, but I want to brag to them about having kissed a girl and becoming an adult.

“Don’t make it sound like I have a lot of free time. I plan to take Emperor Zell to defeat monsters outside town today. I’ll have him start defeating monsters from a young age and start accumulating experience points. If we start his education now, he might be able to swallow the entire Demon King’s castle in a single gulp by next year.”

“The only way I can see this ending is with you and the chick being swallowed in a single gulp. Anyway, where did Megumin go?”

“Megumin left early in the morning. She said something about boasting about her victory as a woman to Yunyun.”

So that girl has gone to do just what I’m planning on doing.

Still, boasting about her victory as a woman? We still haven’t actually become lovers yet, right?

And she’s fine with telling Yunyun? Even though she wants to keep it a secret from Darkness and Aqua?

After briefly pondering upon my words, Aqua lifted the chick in her hands to eye-level.

“Oh, yeah, now’s the time where the adventurer’s guild comes in handy. I think I’ll be accompanying you after all, Kazuma. I’ll find some bored looking people to help me raise Emperor Zell’s level.”

“I really don’t think there’ll be anyone frivolous enough to help a chick grind levels... but alright then, let’s head to the adventurer’s guild.”

The adventurer's guild has a completely different atmosphere compared to yesterday.

"Giant Frog subjugation quest here! We still need a mage!"

"We still need two frontliners! Ones clad in metal armour! Is anyone available?!"

"Seems like several goblins have been spotted in the forest! That's goblins! The beloved goblins that are worth a lot of money! In order to make sure the newbies aren't going to get wiped, we're going with a larger than normal party! Anyone who needs money, feel free to join up!"

"Anyone who can't deal with the frogs, want to try dungeon delving with us? We have a policy of avoiding combat and only searching for treasure! People with the thief class are welcome, you'll be handsomely rewarded!"

The adventurers who would normally laze around getting drunk in the tavern are extremely enthusiastic today.

It's almost like back when Komekko was still around.

I flag down an adventurer I'm acquainted with.

"Hey, what's going on? Why's everyone so hardworking? This isn't like you guys."

If everyone's so hardworking, I will feel bad if I were to slack off alone.

It's the same state of mind that causes me to start sweating when I see others seriously studying before a test.

"Oh, it's Kazuma. Well, what else could it be? It's the taxes yesterday. The taxes. Everyone here was caught by the tax collectors and lost half of their hard-earned money. We're just feeling the pinch from our wallets being suddenly lightened like that."

The adventurer with a scar on his nose sighed.

Oh, I see, adventurers are fundamentally loose with money, after all.

After having experienced the luxuries that come with being rich, there's no way anyone here could bear to see their standard of living drop.

All the adventurers in the guild are desperately running around searching for high-paying jobs that will get them back to that lifestyle.

At this rate, the problem of monsters increasing around the town that Darkness and the guild staff were so worried about would be resolved quite quickly.

“Kazuma-san, Kazuma-san, do you think there’d be anyone who’s free to help Emperor Zell gain some levels? Everyone here seems so busy.”

“That’ll depend on how much you are offering as a reward. Speaking of, do you have a reward prepared?”

Aqua passed Zell over to me before taking out her wallet.

“Well, I have some coupons that can be redeemed at the Axis church for a free confession from me. Do you think that’ll be enough?”

“They’ll probably just rip it up on the spot, so don’t even try. Everyone’s panicking over not having money, after all.”

Still, this is a problem.

I originally came here to find the bunch I usually hang out with and brag about my recent developments...

At that moment—

“Hey, isn’t that Kazuma!? I’ve heard from the tax collectors! Lalatina is the mastermind behind this sudden tax collection, right!?”

An adventurer who I was quite close with suddenly shouted that at us as we were waddling by the entrance.

He was probably caught yesterday; he was visibly angry as he complained to me.

“Hey, we were chased around by Darkness too, you know? You’re complaining to the wrong person. In her words, she said she did this to get the lazy adventurers back to work again, and to resolve the country’s financial issues.”

The adventurer didn’t bother hiding his displeasure.

“Yeah, it’s true that we haven’t been accepting many jobs lately, but even so, didn’t we just recently deal with all the piled up quests...?”

The adventurers around me who agreed with those words started voicing their protests as well.

“She says that it’s to resolve the country’s financial issues, but who knows what she’s actually using that money for? I’ve been hearing rumours, you know? That Lalatina’s been spotted dragging around a young boy and teaching him who knows what.”

In response to the guy who dropped such a bombshell—

“And now Darkness is looking to become a shotacon too? Just how greedy is that woman?”

No, I’m sure that even Darkness wouldn’t cross that line... probably...

And what about that earnestness she showed me yesterday?

It almost drove me to tears to turn her down, but if she was fooling around with a kid behind my back, even I might just end up appearing before Eris-sama again.

Then, Aqua suddenly started looking around excitedly—

“Hey, Kazuma, isn’t this a good opportunity? Look at the covetous gleam in everyone’s eyes.”

She said while looking at the adventurers around the guild with a pitying gaze.

“Aqua-san, I don’t want to hear that from someone who ended up crying after dropping 100 eris down a drain because she was planning on using that to buy ice cream.”

“Shut up, you boorish man. If you keep spreading such baseless rumours, I’ll lay a curse on you that will have you waking up each morning to find that the bed is wet... Anyway,”

Aqua addressed the adventurers who’ve quieten down.

“I’ve found Darkness’s actions to be suspicious recently. As her guardian, I feel a need to resolve the issues plaguing her!”

Aqua proudly hoisted Emperor Zell with both arms above her head.

“I’ve been curious about what she normally gets up to for a long time. Hey, aren’t you guys curious about what she usually does?”

—At an orphanage on the outskirts of Axel.

The kind of place that people from the Eris church regularly bring meals to and wealthy people from other cities occasionally donate their hand-me-downs to.

Aqua, me, and the adventurers that have followed us are currently standing in front of it.

“Hey, oji-san, is Darkness really here?”

“Yeah, you can’t mistake it, Aqua-san. Everyone’s seen Darkness here wearing an erotic outfit and grinning as she looks upon the children playing. I’m not lying.”

I don’t really get the grinning while looking at children bit, but the erotic outfit bit is certainly suspicious.

Just when I resolved myself to knock on the door of the orphanage.

“Lalatina-sama, you shouldn’t do this... It’s still way too early for us...”

What’s undeniably a young boy’s voice could be heard from the other side of the door.

That’s definitely the voice of a boy who has yet to enter puberty.

The boy sounded very apologetic as he said those words.

“What are you saying? The earlier you learn about it, the better. Plus, you’ll need to know this stuff when you become an adult. So, come on, no need to restrain yourself...”

“B-But, Latatina-sama...”

Oh my.

I thought it might have been some kind of misunderstanding, but this is definitely Darkness’s voice.

I suppressed my trembles and placed my ear to the door of the orphanage. The other male adventurers followed suit.

No, not just the male adventurers.

Several of the female adventurers joined us and placed their ears to the door as well.

“Fufu, you say that, but you are actually really curious about it, aren’t you? You can go ahead and touch them.”

Oh my!

I think I recall her saying something along those lines when she was holding me down last night!

Dammit, why isn’t there a skill that allows you to see through walls in this world!? I really want to see what’s going on in there!

... No, wait, it’s still too early to say so.

If there’s a skill such as Farsight in this world, it wouldn’t be strange for there to be some kind of skill that allows you to see through walls.

I should ask about it later.

I wonder who made a gulping noise.

It might even have been me.

“Here, go ahead and touch it. This belongs to you from now on.”

“B-belongs to...”

Hearing Darkness’s words, the boy responded with a voice that’s a mixture of both trepidation and hope.

That girl, what’s with this ‘this belongs to you’ crap!?

After saying all that stuff to me yesterday!

... Has she fallen to such depths because I rejected her?

What's this clawing feeling in my chest?

Am I jealous that Darkness was taken away by someone I don't know? And a younger person at that?

No, this is something that anyone would feel if a close female friend of theirs found a boyfriend...right?

Yeah, even we aren't going out...

"So, what do you think of it?"

"It's firmer than I expected, and it's so smooth and soft. "

After hearing the boy's words, I finally understand what is going on.

Or rather, I understand what he's touching now.

Something's that smooth and soft, and firmer than he expected, that could only be...

"Don't just touch it, why don't you try sniffing it too?"

Hey, even I haven't done that yet.

What's this inexplicable excitement I'm feeling?

Is this what being NTR'd feels like?

I didn't have such a fetish the last time I checked...

"Hey, guys, is the door stuck or something? I'm getting sick of standing around out here, so I'm heading on inside."

Saying that, Aqua, failing to read the mood as usual, goes to open the door.

"Hey, wait—!

I hurried to stop her, but she already opened the door. And beyond that is...

“So, what do you think? A freshly printed book has a really nice smell, doesn’t it? I particularly like the smell of this ink.”

“I like this smell too, Lalatina-sama...”

Beyond the door, a nostalgic scene appeared before me.

Yes, in a room that is almost identical to the classrooms of my world, Darkness, and the boy to whom she’s giving a book to, are happily enjoying its fragrance.

—All the adventurers, including me, stood dumbstruck. Having handed what seemed like a textbook to the young boy, Darkness also couldn’t help but stiffen as she turned to look at us—

“W-Why are you guys here...?”

That’s what we should be asking you.

In the first place, just what is this situation?

All I can see is a female school teacher in a suit giving out textbooks to impoverished children in an orphanage.

“Hey, Darkness, what are you doing? This seems just like a school.”

Hearing what Aqua, who has once again completely failed to read the mood, had to say—

“Y-Yeah, it is. Kazuma mentioned it before, in a certain country, there exists facilities such as this that gives education to children free of charge. The town of Axel has been putting a similar program into action, in order to give the children whose families couldn’t afford private tutors a proper education...”

As we were listening to the explanation, the children who noticed our presence looked at us with sparkling eyes.

Adventurers who battle with monsters every day must seem really cool to these children.

The adventurers who had just their egos inflated by Komekko's admiring gaze some time ago started getting lightheaded once again.

"Have you always been doing this kind of stuff?"

In that short skirt and white shirt, she really does look the part of a female teacher.

... No, in a way you could also say it's a very bad form for an educator.

"Hmm, well, I suppose you could say that. By the way, this is the outfit that I normally wear, but I've heard that it's also the uniform of female teachers of a certain country..."

Oh, that's probably the work of my reincarnated colleagues.

"My father has been thinking about reforming the education system for quite some time, so we're funding this experiment in Axel out of the Dustiness family's own coffers."

Come to think of it, Darkness's father is said to be a very formidable statesman in this country.

I've heard that there are no schools in this country other than the ones in the Crimson Demon Village, but it seems that the people of this country have properly absorbed the ideas brought over by the people from my world and started to implement them.

Just when I was starting to admire that—

"To be honest, it's not something I often show to others, so having you all find out about this is a little embarrassing..."

Darkness shyly said to the adventurers arrayed before her.

"By the way, what did you guys come here for?"

What we came here for? That'd obviously be to see you...

...No, I can't say it.

I can't possibly tell her that we came here to spy on her because we suspected that Darkness might have been collecting taxes just so she could afford to care for her harem of shotas. How could I possibly say something that perverse?

I'm probably not the only one who had such thoughts.

All the adventurers present simultaneously averted their gaze, and the one next to me started nudging me in the back as if to say 'Hey, say something.'

"So um, you know how we got taxed yesterday? We were concerned about where all that money was going to, so we came here to check things out. Ah, after learning that all my hard earned cash is being used to provide children with an education, I'm now overflowing with the motivation to work. Right, guys?"

"Yeah, as expected of Lalatina!"

"The name Lalatina isn't just for show, I see!"

"You are really cool, Lalatina!"

"You're so cute, Lalatina!"

"Shut up! Don't call me Lalatina! Do you guys want to get punched!?"

I noticed the boy who was smelling the book earlier suddenly appear next to the red-faced Darkness. He was hugging the book close to his chest with an apologetic expression on his face.

Having noticed him too, Darkness crouched down in front of him.

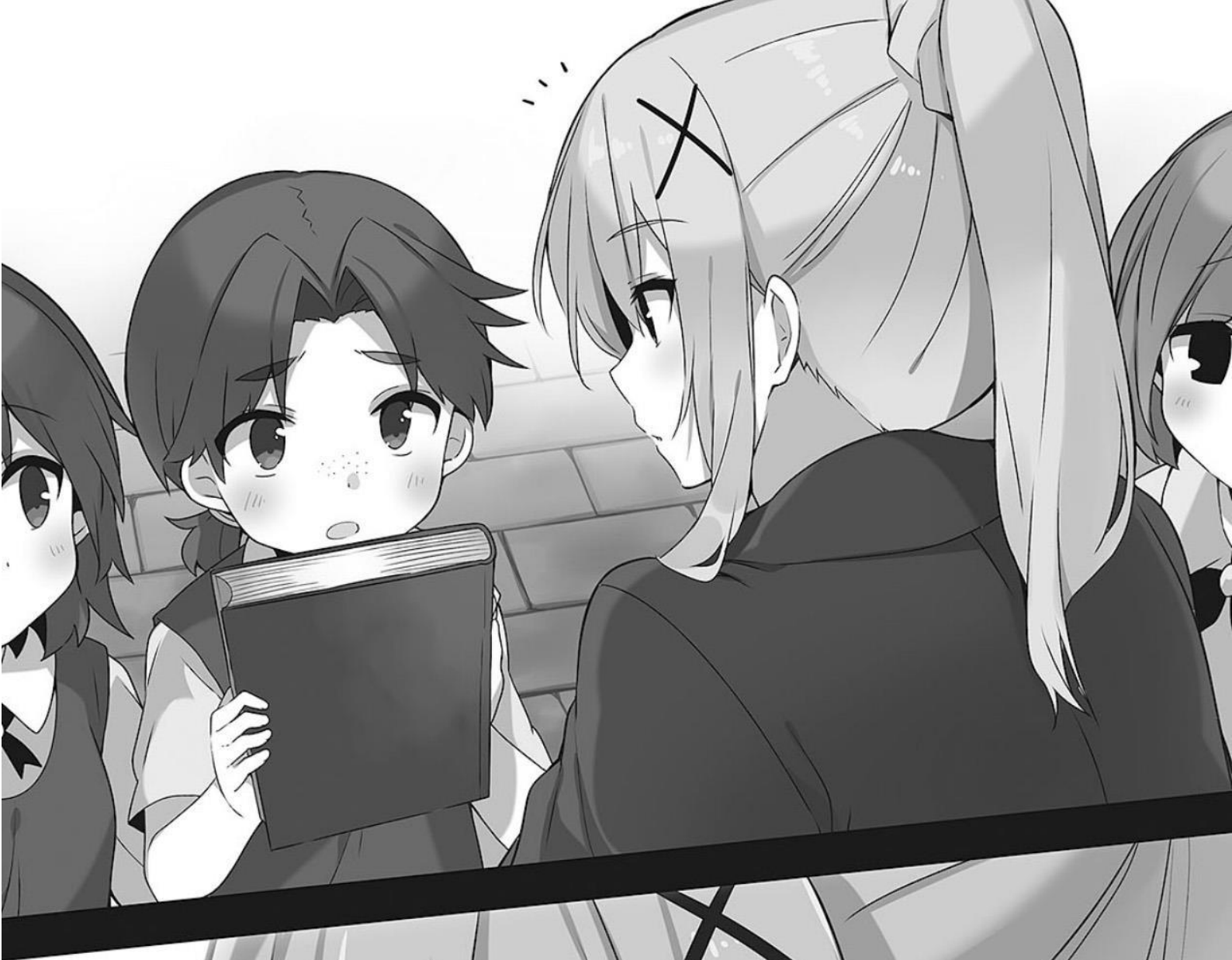
"What's wrong? Please don't mind us, okay?"

"Bu-But, I heard that the food and clothes in this orphanage, and these books too were bought using the money earned by these adventurers..."

...

After hearing the boy's words, the adventurers present fell silent.

Darkness gave the boy a gentle smile.



“Yeah, that’s right. These adventurers fight monsters day and night in order to protect you, and they even give a portion of the money they earned in order to help people like you who’ve lost their parents. So you need to appreciate those feelings and properly treasure that book...okay?”

“... Yeah, I understand. Thank you very much, everyone.”

The boy thanked us with such a smile, and that sentiment was echoed by all the children in the classroom. All the adventurers, including me, were moved to tears.

Then, towards those children,

“I have something to discuss with these adventurers, so please quietly study with your textbooks while we talk.”

Darkness said that while signalling at us to head outside.

“...I showed an embarrassing side of me...”

Darkness bashfully said after we exited the orphanage.

“Say, Darkness, is this orphanage really supported with the money you robbed from us?”

“What do you mean rob? Don’t make it sound that bad. The tax money that you contributed went into helping adventurers who got injured on the job and retired adventurers. The occupation of an adventurer has always had an uncertain future after all. With this, the adventurers who’ve gotten too old to work will at least be guaranteed enough money to eat.”

“Is-is that so? But, those children earlier...”

Yeah, they said something about this and that being funded by us adventurers.

“The Dustiness house is paying for their upkeep, but, as ashamed as I am to admit it, we’ve had some financial issues as of late. The money we taxed from you was used to shore up that deficit, so that’s why... But don’t misunderstand! I will definitely properly repay it! Several people got injured

dealing with the piled up quests the other day, so there's been some unexpected expenses..."

Crap, what should I do?

Although she said she's ashamed, we can't even bear to look directly at her.

The other adventurers around me were also blushing and pointedly avoiding her gaze.

"Umm..."

To the adventurers gathered, Darkness—

"So, that's what I did with the tax money you contributed... Is it acceptable?"

—said apologetically.

"Well, we heard that Lalatina was teaching something or the other to children! So, well, after learning that our money was used for something like this, we are very, well, er, you know, right, everyone?"

"Yeah, of course, it's Lalatina we are talking about. We're just worried that she might be trying to quietly shoulder some big burden on her own!"

"Right? And just like we feared, Lalatina has been pushing herself again! Right?"

"Aren't we comrades? The fact that you're nobility should have nothing to do with this. If you want, we could even escort them on their way to and from school."

What a smooth reversal of attitude.

I'm not in any position to criticize them, but it's pretty amazing that they managed to convert so abruptly.

Hearing those adventurer's words.

"No, there hasn't been any difficulties in particular so far. Just hearing those words is enough, thank you. The safety of the children from regular households as they commute to and from this school is already being handled by a worker of a certain magic item shop."

Darkness showed a genuine, unblemished smile as she said that.

“Still... Hearing you all say that really makes me motivated. Thank you very much. I was sure that you all would still be holding a grudge over what happened yesterday.”

“What are you talking about, Lalatina!?”

“Yeah, Lalatina, don’t be so distant!”

“How could we ever doubt you, Lalatina!”

“Umm, I’m really happy to hear you all say that, but I really wish you would stop calling me Lalatina...”

In attempt to cover their tracks, the adventurers repeatedly praised Darkness, who buried her face in her hands in embarrassment.

“Hey, isn’t this a little different from what you were saying before? Darkness, I’m telling you, before we came here, Kazuma told everyone-”

Still oblivious to the situation, Aqua was neutralized by the nearby adventurers before she could reveal any critical information.

“Hey, what are you doing! Cut it out!”

Aqua slapped at the hands of the adventurers who grabbed her as she struggled intensely.

In order to divert Darkness’s attention away from Aqua’s antics—

“I here thought you were just a perverted noble. I certainly didn’t expect you to be doing such righteous deeds. Why couldn’t you act more like this in your normal life? If you behaved like this, you wouldn’t be unmarriageable and would probably even have a few children by now.”

“What are you talking about!? I’m not unmarriageable, I just chose not to get married! Had I wanted to, I would have plenty of suitors to choose from!”

Hearing Darkness’s angry outburst, one of the adventurers hammered his fist in realization.

“Oh, speaking of which, Lalatina, I heard that you had a child with Kazuma!”

Darkness couldn't help but sputter upon hearing that.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Congratulations, Lalatina!"

"Don't go off and play any strange erotic games on your own now, Lalatina!"

"But isn't it great? Lalatina-chan does have some weird inclinations, after all. I always feared that she'll end up getting abducted by some strange folks."

"I was worried that she would happily head off one day to live in some strange monster's nest. Hearing this puts me at ease."

"Kazuma looks to have a pretty secure future. There's no need to worry about being too poor to afford food if you are with him!"

All the adventurers present started giving us their blessings.

Though, judging from their smirks, it doesn't seem like they are serious.

Everyone's probably just teasing Darkness as a little payback over yesterday's incident.

"You guys! Even after I took pains to explain everything...! You guys don't get it at all!"

Not noticing that she was being teased, Darkness protested while blushing all the way to her ears.

"We get it, we get it! Every noble has their secrets, after all. It's okay if you don't want to admit it! We know how it feels!"

"I hope that the joyous day where the two of you officially declare the date of your marriage ceremony isn't too far off!"

"You guys don't understand! You don't understand at all!"

Darkness desperately tried to refute those allegations.

"So, seriously, how have things been going, Kazuma? Did something really happen between you two?"

"It's Kazuma-san we are talking about. There's no way that something's actually happened, right?"

“Yeah, he’s famous for chickening out at the last moment, after all.”

Oh, yeah, I remembered why I originally wanted to visit the adventurer’s guild.

“All you folks who are still somehow virgins despite working as a rough and tumble adventurer, you better get down on your knees and beg for forgiveness! Don’t think I’ll always be on your level! I even crossed that line yesterday, right, Darkness?”

“Idiot! What are you saying! How could you bring up such a topic right now?!”

Darkness ended up digging herself deeper while trying to refute it.

“She-She didn’t deny it! You’re kidding, right? Lalatina actually admitted it!”

“Wait, seriously? Lalatina-chan, did you actually do it? Hey, how far did you go? Please tell onee-san the details!”

“I thought Aqua-san was just misunderstanding something again when she said that Lalatina had a child...”

“No! You’re mistaken!”

Watching Darkness once again turn bright red and frantically flail around, I decided to throw some more fuel onto the fire.

“What’s so mistaken about it? You tied me down last night, stripped me half-naked and did those kind of things to me! And that was my first time! Are you seriously calling me a liar?”

“No, I do think I was in the wrong, but—!”

“Don’t think that the first time is only important for women! We guys also value our first time highly! It really doesn’t sit well with me to have my first time passed off as some kind of accident!”

“N-no, that’s not what I...! Sorry, that was my fault! I wasn’t thinking straight back then! So, please, let’s both agree to forget about that, please!”

After hearing our conversation, the adventurers around me seemed to be convinced and started looking at me with both admiration and jealousy.

“That’s all I will say about this. I’ll leave what actually took place to your imaginations.”

“You really are...! No, that’s not it, we just—!”

Just as the cornered Darkness was about to explain everything...

“Oh, by the way, I saw a girl in there with blonde hair and blue eyes like Lalatina-chan in there earlier. Is she the child you had with him?”

One of the female adventurers asked with great interest.

Hearing that, the adventurers couldn’t hold back their curiosity any longer, and once again opened the door to the orphanage...!

“You guys, you better cut it...!”

Just as Darkness prepared to resort to violence on the verge of tears...

...She found that the children who were so energetic just a short while ago were now laid lifelessly around the classroom.

“—Fuhahahahaha! Have you cheeky scamps been studying hard today? Moi have come to fetch you all! Now, all who wish to touch my mask, please properly line up... Hmm, what’s going on here?”

Another troublemaker appeared at the chaotic orphanage with a maniacal laugh.

“Hey, you, what are you doing here? I don’t have time to deal with you right now, so I’ll graciously let you live. Now scam! There’s a deserted alley in that direction, go laugh to your heart’s content over there! As you can see, the children are in peril right now!”

While the adventurers hurriedly ran around setting up blankets and laying the children on them, Aqua worked on drawing a large magic circle in the centre of the orphanage.

“Just what is going on? The orphanage has been very peaceful up till now, so how did... Do you not feel at peace unless you bring trouble to everywhere you go?”

“Don’t make it sound like everything bad that happens is my fault! These children just suddenly collapsed for no reason. You’re a more likely suspect! You didn’t do something to these children, did you?”

Vanir resiliently shot back after being accused by Aqua.

“What are you saying, you bringer of misfortune? As if the ever popular-with-children moi would ever do something like that! The only people who would lay such a curse would be members of the most villainous Axis Cult such as yourself!”

Just then.

“But this is really troublesome. To think that they would come down with Colorin disease...”

Vanir’s muttered words caught attention as I was using freeze on a fevered child’s forehead.

“Hey, Vanir, do you know what caused all these children to collapse? What’s with that cutesy sounding Colorin disease?”

Everyone present turned their attention towards Vanir after hearing my words.

“These cheeky scamps have all contracted Colorin disease... It’s an extremely peculiar disease. It will remain dormant for a time after infecting someone, but once that period of dormancy is over, it will disperse a fast acting toxin into its surroundings just like so. From what my all seeing eyes tell me... That girl over there is the host.”

Vanir pointed to the collapsed Sylphina.

“There are two ways to cure this disease.”

Vanir was sitting cross legged on the floor, illuminated by the faint glow emanating from the magic circle that Aqua drew.

The children seem to be in much less pain than before, probably due to the effects of the magic circle.

“First off, treating the children apart from the host is quite simple. A constant application of recovery magic and detoxification magic would see them healthy in no time. But...”

Saying that, he glanced at Sylphina lying motionlessly in Darkness’s arms.

“Detoxification magic would not work on the host. We can only prolong her life using recovery magic while we work on a special antidote.”

“What’s this antidote!? How do you make it!?”

In response to Darkness’s frantic question, Vanir raised his fingers and started counting.

“There are five ingredients required to make it. The onion of an onion duck, the root of a mandragora, tears of a ghost, and there’s...”

The adventurers dutifully wrote down them down as he listed the ingredients.

“And the last ingredient is... This might be tricky to acquire, but it’s the nails of a high ranking devil.”

“God Blow!”



The moment Vanir listed the final ingredient, Aqua threw a punch at him and turned a portion of his body back to dirt.

“What do you think you’re doing during an emergency like this!? Now the floor is all covered with dirt! This is no time to fool around!”

“Yeah, I’m hitting you precisely because it’s an emergency! Ghost tears will be easy to get, we just need to go home and tell a few sob stories. Nevermind that, hurry up and hand over your nails!”

Oh yeah, Vanir is a high-ranking devil himself.

But in response to Aqua’s words, Vanir slowly shook his head.

“Moi is only using a temporary body to inhabit this world. Other than my mask, the rest of my body is made out of dirt.”

Aqua hammered her fist in realization upon hearing those words.

“Right, how about we pay a visit to those girls in that shop? ‘Excuse us, but we need to pry off one or two of your nails.’”

“You fool. Moi said it needed to be the nail of a ‘high-ranking’ demon, didn’t moi? Those hatchlings wouldn’t even register on the scale.”

These guys are probably referring to the Succubi who work at the shop.

But, if that wouldn’t do...

“That leaves us no choice. Very well, it’s time to resort to the demon summoning ritual that have been passed down through the Crimson Demon clan...”

“Wait, Megumin, that’s a little... Vanir, do you not know any other high-ranking devils? Can’t you do something with those all-seeing eyes of yours?”

Darkness asked as she hastily stopped Megumin who was about to prepare some kind of dubious ritual.

“... Hmm, well, moi does know of a high ranking demon who lives close to this town.”

Vanir thoughtfully touched his mask.

“Wh-Where is he!?”

In response to Darkness’s panicked question, Vanir replied...

Chapter 5 : A Banquet with this Devil Count!

Near the entrance to the town of Axel, Megumin and Aqua looked up at us as we boarded the carriage that Darkness hastily prepared.

Since the two of them are staying in the city, they've come to see Darkness and me off while we made our final preparations for the journey.

"You can cast Create Water, so water isn't an issue, but have you brought enough food with you? What about handkerchiefs and tissues? Hey, Kazuma, do you know how to set up a tent? I've heard that some people won't be able to sleep if they suddenly change pillows, so maybe it's best that you bring it along with you?"

"What are you, my mother? You don't have to worry about us. We're veteran adventurers, you know? Our levels are pretty high right now. Plus, it's not that harsh of a journey, so you really don't have to worry so much. Oh, and I don't need a pillow."

Aqua nagged at me like a mother fussing over her son.

"I can't help it. I won't be going with you this time, so take care. If you get killed by a monster, I won't be able to resurrect you. Don't pick up and eat anything strange you find, okay?"

Darkness seemed to be a little troubled by Aqua's fussing, but smiled warmly and replied.

"Aqua, we travelled to both Elroad and Arcanretia, remember? We're all accustomed to travelling, so relax."

"It's because a sheltered lady who knows little of the outside world like you is traveling alone with a shitty NEET that I'm worried."

Why do I have to be spoken of that way by Aqua? If our situations were reversed, she'd be the one who'd be my greatest cause of concern.

"Oh, and Darkness, you need to be especially wary while traveling. Take care not to get assaulted."

In response to Aqua's continued fussing,

"You don't have to worry about that. I'm a Crusader, taking attacks from monsters is my job, so don't worry. I'll keep Kazuma safe."

“What are you talking about? I’m telling to be wary of Kazuma so he doesn’t assault you while you are traveling alone together.”

“Hey.”

Darkness started fidgeting and stealing glances at me after hearing Aqua’s words, seemingly wanting to respond but unable to find the proper words.

“Yeah, you should take care not to be attacked.”

You too, Megumin?

Do you really have that little trust in me?

“I don’t think I’ve done anything that would make you suspect that I’d assault a girl... no, wait, I recall grabbing a girl’s hand and some other stuff happening back in the Crimson Demon village, but... no, sorry, it’s nothing.”

Thanks to Megumin’s questioning gaze, I remembered a lot of unnecessary things and my voice ended up wavering.

“No, what are you saying? I’m telling you to be careful not to get attacked by Darkness because the two of you will be alone together.”

Ah, I see.

“Megumin! Don’t make it sound like I’m some kind of pervert! Just how little trust do you have in... No, nevermind.”

Darkness seemed to wither in the face of Megumin’s stern gaze. Did she remember a bunch of things like I did, I wonder?

Yeah, now that I really think about it, it’ll be just the two of us.

I’m starting to feel anxious.

And recently, the two of us have been a little more conscious of each other, so things have been strangely awkward between us.

Is this alright?

This won’t cause either of us to make some kind of mistake on the road, will it?

Isn't this really dangerous? The two of us are heading to an unfamiliar place, after all. What if something really does happen on the road? It'd just be the two of us, so if something does happen, there won't be anyone around to intervene.

Just when I was occupied with such thoughts, Megumin suddenly handed something to me.

"What's this?"

Is this some kind of magic item?

No, actually, I think I recall seeing something like this before...

"That's the portable toilet that Wiz was selling at a discount at her store. It's a convenient item when you are traveling, so keep it with you."

I see. Yeah, answering the call while on the road is a little troublesome.

The only thing you can do is find a secluded spot to hastily do your business.

"In that case, I'll gratefully accept it... No, wait. Say, Megumin, I know I've seen this thing before. If I recall, there's some kind of flaw in its operation..."

"It seems like it has a function where it creates a loud noise to mask the sound when you're doing business. So if either one of you are attacked, please use this to create a commotion and attract attention to yourself."

So it's an alarm buzzer!?

"... Hey, you don't need that! I wouldn't think about doing those sort of things while the children are still suffering!"

Despite Darkness's words, I still ended up stowing it into the carriage. Just in case.

"Well, I leave the matter of the devil's nails in your hands. Aqua and I will do our best to hold down the fort until you return."

After saying that, the two of us shared a smile.

Megumin and Aqua will be staying back to treat the sick children.

Apparently, Megumin learnt how to brew recovery potions back in her hometown, so she'll be making various preparations while we head out to retrieve the ingredients.

I've bought what ingredients we could from the apothecaries and magic item shops in the city, and the rest of the ingredients will be handled by the other adventurers who were present.

All that's left is the nails of a high-ranking devil...

"I really wanted to meet him and forcibly peel off his nails, but I have to take care of the children, so I'll just have to bear with it. Hey, Kazuma, you better properly finish him off after getting the ingredients, you hear?"

"Didn't you hear what Vanir said? The guy we are dealing with might be a devil, but he's also a noble of this country, you know?"

Yes, we're heading towards the castle of a certain noble of this country.

Apparently, high-ranking devils have been disguising themselves as humans in order to mingle with this country's nobility.

Darkness appears to be disturbed after hearing that, but it seems like she's leaving that issue until after the problem with the children are dealt with.

And thus, the two of us are heading out to negotiate with that high-ranking devil.

"Kazuma-san, Kazuma-san."

"What? Do you still have something to say?"

Aqua handed over something to us after we both boarded the carriage.

"It's a new test product that Wiz is offering in her shop. Apparently this is patterned after something you tried to make before. You can't tell what will happen while you're on the road, so take this with you, just in case."

I took the knock-off condom that I once tried to make and angrily tossed it to the ground.

The carriage that Darkness was driving rattled as it rolled down the highway.

Sitting next to Darkness as she held the reins, my sense of curiosity buzzed at me until I couldn't take it any longer.

"Hey, Darkness, let me take the reins for a bit."

It's been about an hour since we left Axel.

Having grown bored of watching the scenery flow past, I gave in to my sense of curiosity and made such a request of Darkness.

"Don't be stupid. It takes some skill to properly handle a carriage. You need to keep both the speed of the carriage and the stamina of the horses in mind, neither going too fast nor too slow..."

"The only thing you've been doing for a while is holding the reins. Come on, let me try. It's really boring here."

It's been over a year since I came to this world.

In a world without easy access to entertainment, I can't possibly let the opportunity to drive a carriage slip me by.

In the first place, I came to this world to have adventures.

Well, I ended up becoming a complete NEET recently, but still...

"Okay, fine. Just a little while, alright? Don't pull on the reins too hard. In general, you can just let the horse handle it."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. Just grab hold of the reins and whip it every now and then, right?"

"Don't whip it! That's only to be done in the case of an emergency! Really, don't do it! This isn't a joke, don't fool around like you usually do! Do you understand that?"

I nodded my head in response to Darkness's repeated warnings.

"... There's nothing that looks like a handbrake or steering wheel here. And where's the clutch?"

"What are you saying? Don't just start spouting nonsense!"

As Darkness made a move to snatch the reins away from me, I raised a hand to calm her down.

“Relax. It’s just an isekai joke.”

I made those jokes in order to lessen the awkward atmosphere we had between the two of us.

Darkness’s been acting weird ever since we left.

No, it’s not just now that she’s been acting weird.

Recently... To be more accurate, ever since Darkness confessed to me...

“What does ‘isekai joke’ even mean....? We’ll be free until we reach the next town, so let’s take this chance to learn more about you. I’ve been curious for quite some time.”

This girl, she suddenly became lively the moment we are away from town.

“So, let’s start with your place of birth.”

Ignoring my worries, Darkness, who’s now the passenger, eagerly asked me as I held the reins.

“I come from a country called Japan. It’s one of the leading economic powers in the world, and full of people with black hair and black eyes, like me.”

“Japan... Japan...”

Darkness repeated, tapping her fingers on her knee.

“You should have at least heard the name before. Pretty much all of the strangely named folks that you’re familiar with came from Japan.”

Hearing my words, Darkness raised her head as she made the connection.

“Yeah, that’s it! All those people with black hair and eyes like yours always seem to possess some amazing power. That Mitsu-something guy with the magic sword was also like this. He had that abnormally powerful weapon... Just how did he get his hands on something like that... The others were like that too. The ones who carved their names into history all basically had features like yours. Then, that means...”

Darkness swallowed and looked at me with an expectant gaze.

“... Don’t tell me that you also have some kind of amazing skill or weapon?”

“I don’t have anything like that. The only thing I have is the high luck I was born with and a slightly above average intelligence, and I suppose just a little bit of bravery and the heart of an adventurer...”

In response, Darkness started twirling her hair with her finger. And the expectant gaze which she gave me just a while ago...

“In other words, you’re just a powerless, ordinary man...”

Oh, that’s the gaze you give to someone whom you pity.

“Hey, what do you think such an ordinary man like me has achieved! Don’t sigh and look so disappointed! An ordinary man like me having accomplished so much is pretty amazing, you know!? You should be praising me! Shower me with praise and compliments!”

“How should I put this, have you changed a little recently? Is it because Aqua has influenced you, or the other way round... Or have you always been like this...”

This girl just said something unthinkable.

“Don’t lump us together. All she does is eat, sleep, and drink, and does stupid things all day. Putting me in the same group as her is...”

“Isn’t that no different from what you normally do?”

I turned my gaze to the horse at the end of my reins dragging our carriage along at a quick pace.

“Aren’t horses cute? How do I put it, I quite like how they always have such a gentle gaze. I’m fine with cats and chicks, but I think I like horses the best.”

“Hey, don’t look away. And look into my eyes... Seriously. Anyway, back to the original topic, you told me that you were a ranker in your home country, right?”

.... Huh?

... Ranker?

I gave her a questioning look.

“Hey, why are you looking at me like that!? You mentioned that you were a ranker in your country before, didn’t you? You were given all kinds of nicknames and were looked up to by everyone, and you spent your days hunting with your companions and challenging formidable bosses...”

Yeah, I did.

Come to think of it, I did say those kinds of stupid things, didn’t I?

If I recall, those were me recounting the time I spent playing that MMO.

“Well, that did happen, but it’s all in the past now. It’s kind of like an embarrassing history of mine, so it’s best not to bring it up.”

“Why? What’s so embarrassing about it? Those are the memories you made together with your close friends, aren’t they? Those are all respectable achievements. You should take pride in them.”

Darkness seemed to have misunderstood something and chuckled.

“Or what, do you perhaps find it embarrassing? Even though you constantly boast about defeating how many Demon King Generals?”

... She probably wouldn’t understand it if I just honestly told her that those were tales of what happened in an MMO.

Well, she seems like she’s having fun, so I guess it doesn’t really matter too much...

“Hey, Kazuma, I recall you saying that you can’t return to your country anymore... Do you ever feel lonely over not being able to meet your family?”

Having placed both hands on her knees, Darkness suddenly asked me that with a strangely sombre expression.

“I’ve never once felt lonely since I came over to this world. There wasn’t ever a chance to, what with you guys raising a fuss all the time. Actually, I’ve never even thought of my family until now... Wait, AHHHHH!”

“W-What’s wrong, Kazuma? Do you sense an enemy?”

Darkness jerked upright and started scanning the surroundings after hearing my sudden scream.

“No, that’s not it! I just remembered! I lent my brother five hundred yen! He said he lacked five hundred yen to buy the equipment he needed for his club, so I lent it to him! He still owes me that money!”

In response, Darkness nervously asked.

“Fiv-Five hundred yen? Is that a large amount of money?”

“Well, if you convert it to the currency used here, I’d say it’d be worth about 500 Eris.”

“Just write it off! It’s not like you’d miss such a small amount of money. I heard that you tried to bribe Rain off when they were about to throw you out of the castle. Seems like you still haven’t learnt your lesson and caused quite a commotion back there. When I wrote to them to report that you’ve regained your memory, Claire-dono and Rain sent a tearful letter of apology along with several gifts. I felt that they were way too weighty and had them respectfully returned, but...”

Wait, what?

“What do you think you’re doing with tributes meant for another person? I haven’t forgiven them! If I see them again, I’ll definitely make them regret being born a woman. I’ve got some really nice punishments in store for them that would traumatise even you.”

“...S-Say, about those traumatic punishments, just how far are you going to go? Could you tell me some details...”

“Shut up! It’s definitely something that even you will hate! Stop blushing!”

And just like that, the two of us progressed smoothly on our journey, encountering neither monsters nor any troublesome obstacles on the road.

“To think that our travels would progress so well as long as Aqua isn’t around. I wouldn’t mind taking a few more trips like this.”

“Hey, Kazuma, I don’t think Aqua is deliberately trying to create problems when we travel. Through I do get how you feel after having such a smooth journey... Rather than that, just what are the ‘samurai’ tribe that you mentioned? Can you please go into more detail?”

Since she seemed to be very interested, I’ve been sharing stories about Japan to Darkness over the course of the journey.

“You sure are interested in samurai, huh? Well, it’s just like I said. They wield wickedly sharp swords known as Katana on the battlefield, and they’ll split their bellies at the drop of a hat.”

“Split their bellies?”

Judging by her surprise, there probably isn’t anything similar to seppuku in this world.

“Yeah, if they offend their master, they’ll split their bellies. If they lose a battle, they’ll split their bellies. If they surrender, they’ll split their bellies.”

“Isn’t that a little extreme? If you have to split your belly when you surrender, doesn’t that invalidate the purpose of surrendering in the first place?”

Japanese culture seems to be full of wonders for the people of this world.

“Samurai value honor highly, after all. As to how much they value it, they value it enough that they’ll purposefully style their hair in a manner that would invoke fear in their enemies. Then, in battle, they’ll go around collecting the heads of their foes to use as trophies.”

“Are they some kind of head hunting tribe? But are they not concerned about wiping themselves out? They split their bellies so readily...”

Well, yeah, there are no longer any samurai left in the world, after all.

“What about the others? I want to hear more about the ninjas you mentioned earlier!”

It seems like it’s not only foreigners who love ninja, but the people of this world too.

“Ninjas are primarily active at night. They use the cover of darkness to infiltrate fortresses and take down their prey. Oh, and I also heard that they make use of poison.”

“Attacking from the cover of darkness, great at breaking into fortresses and poisonous... They really sound scary...”

I get the feeling that she’s getting the wrong idea, but...

“Oh, and in manga and stuff, they can use lighting or fire release or something and breathe fire or lightning in battle.”

“What? They are capable of using magic breath too?... What else can they do?”

Yeah, she’s definitely getting the wrong idea.

“The most famous skill they have would be the clone creation technique. They can create countless copies of themselves.”

“They really do sound scary. I see, are these ninja monsters are hermaphroditic... ?”

It’d be a pain to clear things up, so let’s just leave it be.

... Still, it seems like the awkward atmosphere that we had before we set off has been totally dispersed.

—Yes, up till now at least.

“It’s great that we managed to stumble upon this cave. With this, we don’t have to set up a tent, and we can block the entrance with the carriage after moving the horses to the back of the cave. Looks like we’ll be able to sleep soundly tonight.”

“Yeah.”

It’s completely dark outside, and the season is such that one would get chilly if they were to sleep out in the open.

That said, it’d be a bad idea to build a fire with just the two of us here.

There are monsters that aren’t afraid of fire. Lighting a fire wouldn’t deter such beasts, and are in fact more likely to attract their attention.

“We have some jerky and hardtack, so let’s have ourselves a simple dinner with these.”

“Yeah.”

It seems like Darkness is looking forward to trying out the jerky and hardtack. She's probably never tasted them before, having eaten high-class cuisine all her life.

Well, it's not like I don't understand her feelings.

When you talk about adventurers going on a journey, their rations will of course involve jerky and hardtack.

Even I am looking forward to trying it myself.

Though...

"After dinner, let's lay down a blanket somewhere in the cave and go to sleep. It's a pity that we can't have a bath, but we can at least wipe ourselves down."

"Yeah."

Darkness said as she brought out a washbasin and a towel.

I've just been blindly agreeing to everything Darkness said.

"What's wrong with you? Are you even listening to me?"

Darkness glared at me.

"Yeah, I am. You want me to use Create Water to make some water for you to wash up, right? Give me a sec, I'll do it right now."

"I didn't say that... Well, I do want some water, but..."

Ignoring the slightly confused Darkness, I aimed my hand at the basin and prepared to use my magic.

"Ah."

We both exclaimed at the same time as the tips of our fingers brushed against each other.

The horses that were resting at the back of the cave let out a snuffle.

The soft songs of the insects active in autumn filled the air.

The surroundings were only barely illuminated by the light of the stars.

It's all very romantic...

"N-no, I don't need any water. I had a bath before setting out this morning, after all!"

"Oh yeah, I don't need to wash up either! All I did today was sit on the carriage, so I didn't sweat too much."

Yeah, it's not like I worked up a sweat or anything, so let's just have dinner then go to sleep.

Awkwardly avoiding meeting each other's gaze, we brought out the hardtack and jerky.

I filled our cups with Create Water. Then, without bothering to light a fire, both of us dug into our hardtack with only the light of the stars to guide us.

"Tough!"

We both exclaimed at the same time.

"Hey, what the hell? I've heard that hardtack is tough, but I didn't expect it to be this tough. How are we even supposed to bite into this?"

"Why are you asking me that? ... Aren't I a sheltered lady? I know little of the outside world. This is something that you should know."

Even if you ask me, how the hell are you supposed to eat this?

Nevermind, let's just leave it aside for now.

Let's start with the jerky...

Darkness followed my lead and picked up her jerky.

"Salty!"

The both of us exclaimed once more.

"Hey, isn't it dangerous to eat this? We'll definitely get hypertension and die if we eat this. Actually, isn't this just a ball of salt?"

"Shouldn't this be used as stock in some kind of stew or something? It certainly looks like it'd be bad for you if you eat it straight up..."

I returned the hardtack and jerky to my place, then stood up and picked up my bow.

“H-Hey, Kazuma, where are you going this late at night?”

“I’m a NEET who grew up in a country of fine cuisine like Japan. There’s no way I could eat this! Especially not after our standard of living has been steadily rising! I have Farsight, Enemy Detection, and Snipe. I can easily bag a rabbit or two. I’ll go out for a short hunt, you stay here and gather up some twigs and branches. If it’s just long enough to cook a meal, making a small fire shouldn’t attract the attention of any monsters.”

“You really are reliable at times like this...”

—After finishing a surprisingly delicious meal made from skewering a horned rabbit I caught, we decided to turn in for an early night, but...

... I can’t sleep.

Am I feeling nervous because I’m traveling, or is it because of something else?

Even though I’ve been lying down for quite some time, I still can’t fall asleep.

Am I just wary because I’m sleeping outdoors?

Enemy Detection isn’t giving off any unusual readings.

Plus if anything happens, I’m sure the neighing of the horses in the cave will wake me up.

Or perhaps it’s because I’m not used to sleeping with nothing more than a blanket between me and the cold hard ground of the cave...

No, I know exactly why I’m having trouble falling asleep.

Just as I turned over for the countless time,

“Kazuma, are you awake... ?”

I heard Darkness say in a gentle and extremely soft voice.

“... Kazuma?”

It's voice soft enough that I can only barely make out.

If I were asleep, I would probably never even notice it. It's that soft.

It would've been simple to say that I'm awake, but for some reason, I remained silent.

“Have you fallen asleep...?”

I kept pretending to be asleep.

Then, I heard the rustling of cloth sliding off her, followed by the soft sound of her footsteps.

Seems like Darkness got up from under her blanket to go somewhere else.

“It's fine, Kazuma's sleeping... Right?”

I heard her say in a 'I should confirm it' tone of voice before she slowly crept towards me.

Just what is she planning?

What are you planning to do when I'm asleep!?

Was tossing away the thing that Aqua gave me a mistake?

The situation I was fearing the most... Yes, spending the night out alone with Darkness.

Didn't she say it was unlikely for an accident like this to happen?

After confirming that I'm really asleep, Darkness took a deep breath...!

And, without doing anything to me, crept to the mouth of the cave and started fumbling with something.

A loud noise echoed throughout the cave.

“Hey, what are you doing! Why are you making such a racket this late at night?”

I rushed out in a panic.

“No, this is, umm, the portable toilet just suddenly started making this kind of noise...!”

Darkness who looked to be on the verge of tears said while pointing at the box that was continued to make such a racket.

It looked similar to the portable toilets that they would set up at construction sites and such back in Japan.

“I see. I was wondering what you were up to when you got up in the middle of the night. So you’ve been holding it in for the entire journey...”

“Don’t just casually say something like that! And you were awake!?”

Darkness blushed brightly enough that it shone through even on this moonless night.

“Of course I am! I’m alone, in the dark, with a woman who’s assaulted me many times before sleeping next to me. Under such circumstances, of course I’d be wary.”

“Who would do something like that under such circumstances!? Nevermind that, what do we do with this!? I can’t make the toilet stop ringing!”

While this situation sounds humorous, it’s actually very dire.

“Hey, monsters are starting to gather! They’re being drawn by this noise! Enemy Detection is pinging like crazy! Wake the horses up! I feel bad for waking them in the middle of the night, but we have to go! Grah, I should never have said that things are progressing smoothly just because Aqua isn’t here! You useless piece of trash!”

“I’m really sorry! I’m sorry for being a useless Crusader!”

After surviving such a hectic night.

Close to noon on the next day, we've arrived at a small border town a day and a half's ride away from Axel.

The aristocrat that we needed to see has made his residence in such a remote town.

"Please, my name is Dustiness ford Lalatina. I have urgent matters to discuss with your lord, that's why I've made my way here. Please call for him."

After hearing Darkness' passionate plea, the gatekeepers nodded and replied.

"Our lord will not see anyone without prior appointments. Even if it is Lady Dustiness, I cannot make an exception..."

"Please, can't you do something about that?"

Darkness interrupted the gatekeepers before they could finish.

"E-Even if you say that, those are the rules..."

"Please, I don't have much time left!"

Faced with Darkness' usual straightforward approach, the gatekeeper faltered.

That's how important the children are to her.

Yeah, she's always been a direct and forthright person.

She's hard-headed and stubborn, but that's all to protect the people she cares about.

I'm sure she'll resolutely stand there until the lord of the castle comes out to her.

"Now that it's come to this, I'll lend a hand. Hey, you guys, this girl is probably going to end up standing there until she meets the lord. It's going to turn into an endurance contest."

After hearing my words, the gatekeepers seemed troubled.

I'm sure they'll at least send word to him in this case.

At least, that was what I was thinking, but Darkness—

“No, I really am in a hurry, so I can't afford to wait around!”

“...No, come on, just go along with me. It's not like you can just force your way inside.”

I made a troubled expression similar to the ones that the gatekeepers had.

“... If you put it that way, then I suppose I can at least send word to the lord...”

After saying that, one of the gatekeepers disappeared out back towards the main building.

“That's great, Darkness. With this, we've taken the first step—”

“That won't do! Please let me see him!”

.....

“What are you doing? I know that we are in a hurry, but you should put a bit more trust in Megumin and Aqua. Don't you remember what we came here to do!?”

Perhaps she was moved by my words, or she remembered what she originally came here for, but Darkness slowly teared up and....

“Please, let me use your toilet...”

She lowered her head to the gatekeepers and said that in a small voice.

“—We ended up embarrassing ourselves thanks to you!”

“That's my line! You were the one who raised your voice and attracted a crowd!”

Thanks to that little emergency, we managed to gain entry into the castle and secure a meeting with the lord.

“I told you to handle it in a secluded spot somewhere. This is why I hate dealing with noble ladies, their pride gets in the way at the strangest times. You still dare call yourself an adventurer?”

“No, I know that having to deal with business out in the wilderness is unavoidable for an adventurer, but what does that have to do with me being a noble lady...? Ugh, this is the first time I’ve regretted becoming an adventurer.”

I walked down the halls of the castle along with Darkness, who looked slightly more refreshed than before.

“Thank you for waiting, Dustiness-sama. The lord will see you now.”

The gatekeeper who was guiding us said before retreating.

We’ve come to lavishly furnished hall.

It’s not just a collection of expensive furniture all garishly thrown together either, they had a distinct theme and it all fit together quite well.

From that, I can tell that the lord didn’t just recently have a windfall.

“Hey, Darkness, you mentioned that this noble is a little odd, didn’t you? What do you mean by that? What kind of person is the lord of this castle? Is he a pervert like you?”

“Just what do you think us nobility are? The ones you’ve met are all a little weird, true, but most nobles are highly respected and an example to the common folk... Er, well, leaving me aside...”

Darkness withered before my gaze, letting out a small cough.

“The lord of this castle is Count Zereschrute. He’s known as the Lord of Brutality.”

Just hearing that name gave me chills.

I recall hearing a similar title back in Japan.

What was it again? Something about a nickname of a really fearsome noble from another country who ended up forming the basis for the legend of vampires or something?

Are we really going to negotiate with a noble who has such a scary title?

Maybe it was a mistake to just send the two of us here.

Unreasonable nobles like Alderp do exist in this world, after all.

If we earn his ire in a small backwater town like this, who knows what would happen to us?

It'd be easy to fabricate proof that we were devoured by some monster or another if we were to vanish out here.

Just as I was thinking that, I heard a knock on the main door, signalling that the Lord of Brutality is about to arrive.

Crap, I kind of want to go home now.

“Hey, Darkness, maybe we should regroup and come back with some more people...”

Just as I said that and was about to stand up.

The main door opened, and what entered was...

“It's been some time, Lord Zereschrute. My apologies for the sudden visit, but this is a matter of some urgency...”

“Lady Dustiness, thank you for making the journey... I've heard the details, it seems like you need one of my nails to brew some kind of antidote... And if you are seeking that, am I safe in assuming that you know what I am?”

The two nobles immediately began negotiations after trading the necessary greetings.

But there's something I have to say, no matter what.

“Hey, Darkness, is this man really a noble of this country? You didn't figure out his true identity until recently, right?”

In response to my words, Darkness—

“What are you saying, Kazuma? We are currently in the middle of important negotiations, so don't butt in. My apologies, Lord Zereschrute, this man is Satou Kazuma. He is my escort and also my companion as an adventurer.”

“I’ve heard about him. He’s said to be an adventurer who has vanquished quite a few generals of the Demon King’s Army. He doesn’t look to be anything special, but they do often say that looks can be deceiving...”

I turned towards the two of them.

“Hey, how are you two just conversing normally? Come on, Darkness, isn’t he suspicious as hell? Why is he wearing a penguin suit? Are you saying that this thing is really a noble!? Where should I even begin!?”

I yelled as I pointed at the man wearing a penguin mascot suit standing in front of me.

The two nobles suddenly fell silent. Did I accidentally broach upon a thorny topic?

Yeah, it’s a mascot suit.

However you slice it, it’s a penguin mascot suit.

“Hey, say something. What the hell is going on with this country? Not only are people like you and Claire counted as high-ranking nobles, now there’s a guy wearing a penguin costume? Did you ever tried to find out what the guy looks like underneath it?”

Hearing my words, Darkness looked at me with an uncomfortable expression.

“Do you recognise the magic armour that the Count is wearing? It’s not a costume, it’s a piece of armour from a far away land. It’s durable, flexible, waterproof and retains heat well in winter... In this country, as long as you have the talent, a few peculiarities can be easily overlooked. We require skilled people in order to fight against the enemy of all mankind, the Demon King’s Army.”

“No, no matter how you put this, this is way too suspicious. The guy inside may very well be a spy for the Demon King’s Army!”

In response, the penguin casually sat down on the sofa in front of us.

“Now, now, calm down. You don’t have to worry about that, I have no intentions of helping the Demon King’s Army. You can trust me on that.”

“Anyone who would honestly trust you after seeing what you look like needs to go see a doctor.”

Hearing my retort, the penguin shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

Those needlessly humanlike motions are really rubbing me the wrong way.

“Well, hear me out, young man. If you know my true identity, you must have some basic knowledge about devils, yes? To us devils, humanity is an important partner that we need to coexist with. Please believe me.”

“The devil Vanir who introduced you to us once mentioned that us humans are machines that create wonderful meals for you devils.”

Hearing that, the penguin suddenly turned motionless.

“What, you’re acquainted with Vanir-sama? Then that speed things up a little. Indeed, you humans produce wonderful meals for us. The dark emotions and thoughts that you experience are our sustenance. If you understand that, then hurry up and feel some dark emotions, you ill-mannered brat.”

This penguin suddenly changed his tone!

“My apologies for his rudeness, Lord Zereschrute. We have not shared the fact that you are a devil with the citizens of Axel, and we promise not to speak of your secret to anyone else. So, please...”

The penguin that was so rude just a moment ago changed his tone to one of interest after hearing Darkness’s words.

“If I recall, Lady Dustiness is a devout follower of the Eris church, yes? Is it really okay for you to overlook a devil like me? And you are an important figure in this country too. Surely you can’t let a suspicious character like me run free, can you?”

The penguin said teasingly. Darkness turned to look at me, a serious look on her face.

“In the past, I’m afraid I wouldn’t simply let it go.... However, this man made me realize just what it is that I need to protect. What I should be protecting isn’t the pride of the nobles, but those without power. He taught me what it really means to not let my principles get in my way of what needs to be done, and I believe I’ve become a better politician because of that. And... I need to thank you, Kazuma. If it weren’t for you, I would still be a hard-headed crusader. If it were the past me, I most likely would not have been able to overlook Lord Zereschrute after learning his true identity.”

Darkness gave me a smile as she said that.

“So, what do you think, Lord Zereschrute? Was that a satisfactory answer?”

Darkness turned back to the penguin.

“... No, it’s not my intent to hear your motivations... If I recall, Crusaders are able to use holy magic. I was simply worried that it might cause problems if you were to lose your magic by going against the teachings of the Eris church...”

The atmosphere suddenly became extremely awkward.

“Umm... I can’t use magic, so there won’t be any problems on that front... Thank you for your concern...”

Darkness seemed to be shriveling up from embarrassment.

“Well, that’s good then. Oh, those are the feelings of shame that Vanir-sama likes so much. I’m not particularly fond of them myself, so there’s no need to offer such emotions to me.”

Facing the teasing of the penguin, Darkness hid her blushing face under the table.

“—Now then, let’s go back to our original topic. You wish to have one of my nails, yes? Unlike greater devils like Vanir-sama whose real body still remains in hell, for a devil who has brought his true body into this world like me, even removing a small portion of my nails causes me great pain.”

The penguin said in a dignified voice while regally crossing his legs.

His voice and mannerisms are a splitting image of a big shot noble, and clashed horribly with his comical appearance.

“Regarding that, we don’t have a lot of money on hand currently... but I swear, on the name of the Dustiness family, that I will repay you. It might take some time, but I’ll definitely offer a fitting recompense. So, please...”

The Penguin remained silent in the face of Darkness’s passionate pleas.

According to Vanir, devils in general place great importance on contracts.

Simply pleading like this probably wouldn’t work.

Guess it’s time for me to lend a hand.

“I’ll prepare the money.”

“Wha-?”

Darkness turned to me in surprise.

What do you think I tagged along for?

It’s to help out in precisely these types of negotiations.

“I may not look like much, but I have quite a sizable fortune. And I’ve been doing some forward trading lately as well.”

“Y-You, since when did you get involved in that? Don’t do it! An amateur can very easily go bankrupt fooling around with that.”

To the worried Darkness, I smugly waggled my finger.

“You see, Darkness, according to the information I gathered, it seems like a higher than usual amount of snow sprites are predicted to appear this year. That means that this year’s winter will be colder. With that in mind, I targeted crops that will be highly affected by the cold... Furthermore, I even got an expert on such matters to handle it.”

“T-The moment I took my eyes off you... How did you even get acquainted with such an expert...?”

Darkness seemed to have gained a modicum of respect for me, if her gaze is anything to go by.

But our conversation doesn’t seemed to have piqued the Penguin’s interest at all.

“No, I’m not concerned about money. I’m sure you are aware of the state of my finances. My territory is prosperous, and I make great contributions in taxes every year. That’s why I’m allowed to hold such a rank despite my appearance... On that front, it could be said that I contribute more to this country than the Dustiness family that’s known for its poverty.”

“U, uu...”

This penguin may look cute, but he sure doesn’t hold back.

“... I see, then, how about using the backing of the Dustiness family to help expand your territory?”

“Kazuma, what are you saying? Don’t go deciding that on your own!”

The penguin shakes his shoulders in response, almost like he’s laughing.

“No, no, I’m quite happy with the lands I currently have. I have no desire to expand my territory at this point.”

Does this creature really want for nothing?

“Hey, Darkness, doesn’t your family outrank him? Can’t you use your authority to strongarm him into giving what we want?”

“Don’t be stupid! I did say I wouldn’t let my principles get in the way earlier, but even so, there’s no way I’m doing that!”

“I can hear you, you know?”

The penguin interrupted as we were whispering.

Damnit, if it’s come to this...

“Hey, we aren’t demanding anything unreasonable like asking you to hand over your fortune or anything. It’s just a mere piece of your nail. Why don’t you just hand it over. Like that, the children will be happy, we will be happy, and you’ll get to keep your identity secret. It’s a win-win with three wins, so just hand it over.”

“I can’t see that as anything but a threat.”

The penguin said in an interested voice, tinged with just a bit of amusement for some reason.

Yes, that was a threat.

“Hahaha, Zereschrute-san, did you know? There’s a fearsome Archpriest of the Axis Cult who would fly into a rampage at the mere sight of a devil in Axel. If she learns that you rejected our request, I wonder what will happen...”

“Hey, Kazuma, that’s going too far! I can’t tell who’s the actual devil now!”

The penguin let out a hearty laughter that shook his body.

“Hahaha, as expected of an acquaintance of Vanir-sama! I didn’t expect there to be a person bold enough to try and intimidate a devil! Truly amusing! Well, I’m not entirely without desires. It’s just that what I want is not wealth or material goods.”

Hearing the penguin say those words, Darkness enthusiastically raised her head.

“Could that be... my body!? You are eying my body, aren’t you!? You want me to offer myself to you in order to save the children! Damn you, Lord Zereschrute! As expected of one with the title of the Lord of Brutality. Fooling everyone with your cute appearance, only to reveal the brute hiding inside...”

“N-No, that’s not it! Devils have no gender and are have no interest in the bodies of humans. Stop making me sound like some kind of brute!”

For the first time since we met him, the penguin seemed flustered.

“You guys are adventurers, aren’t you?”

He happily asked.

“Then, would you like to accept a little noble’s challenge?”

The penguin said in a dignified voice, in complete contrast to his cute appearance.

“You see, some nobles like to entertain themselves by watching monsters fight and betting on the outcome.”

There’s an arena underneath the castle.

As a servant guided us there, I listened to Darkness’ explanation.

“Didn’t the prince bring out a gryphon when we were in Elroad? It’s something of a status symbol for nobles to have powerful monsters on hand.”

It seems like that penguin also has a hobby of collecting monsters.

And the condition that the penguin gave is...

“Fight the monsters that that penguin brings out and show your strength, huh...”

This might be the most adventurer-like event I’ve experienced since coming over to this world.

Fight through a gauntlet of monsters that an aristocrat has prepared in order to receive an ingredient needed to create an antidote for a sick child.

It certainly sounds cool, but...

“The problem is if Darkness can win on her own.”

Yes, only Darkness will be taking part in the battle.

“I don’t know what he’s planning, but you need to be careful now that you’re fighting alone. Sure, he says that devils have no gender and aren’t interested in the human body, but who can tell if that’s really the case. Seeing a female knight get roughed up and flung into all sorts of positions is just what a villain would want, so who knows what kind of monster he would bring...”

Darkness shivered upon hearing that.

If she were any other girl, I would’ve asked her if she was afraid, but...

“You’re looking forward to that, aren’t you?”

“...No, not at all.”

We eventually parted ways as Darkness entered the arena, seemingly unperturbed.

The arena in the basement of the castle is a splitting image of a colosseum made during the time of the Roman Empire.

It's wide enough that dozens of people could fight at once, and the ground is comprised of stamped dirt.

The servant guided me to a seat next to the penguin.

The penguin looked at Darkness in the arena and said in an excited voice.

"Welcome to my colosseum. Normally, this place is used to pit monsters that other noblemen bring against each other, but... Today, the main event is you, Lady Dustiness!"

The penguin enthusiastically announced, making exaggerated gestures to the non-existent audience.

Of course, the only people present were me, the penguin, and some servants. The entire arena was lit up by some kind of magic item, and looked like it was under direct sunlight even though we were underground.

"Bring it on, Lord Zereschrute! I'm a devout believer of Eris and a Crusader, no matter what kind of monster you bring, I'll never submit!"

Darkness shouted back in a voice just as enthusiastic as the one the penguin used, a blush rising to her cheeks.

... Am I imagining it?

It feels like the two of them are extremely excited over this.

"As expected of the honourable Lady Dustiness! Well said, very well said! The feelings of shame, humiliation, and anguish that such confident warriors experience when laid low are the kind of emotions that I desire! Now, proud Crusader! Show me what you can do!"

As the penguin excitedly exclaimed, the iron gate on the other side of the arena slid open.

The two of us looked expectantly at Darkness who was standing in the middle of the arena, and what appeared before her was...

“Let’s start small. Lady Dustiness, show me how you handle this group of goblins!”

At those words, a group of goblins close to a dozen strong rushed at Darkness.

It’s been about ten minutes since the penguin announced the start of the battle.

“This is terrible.”

The penguin and I said at the same time.

“Kuh, to think that I’ll be restrained by goblins...! You little demons, what do you intend to do after immobilizing me!?”

Darkness, who was unable to defeat even one goblin despite her reckless flailing, yelled after getting mobbed by the goblins and pulled to the ground.

“Just what’s the meaning of this, Lady Dustiness... You are a great noble of this country, and the one who vanquished many generals of the Demon King’s army. You shouldn’t be having this much trouble with such a small group of goblins... Oh, I see!”

The penguin muttered to himself, then nodded as though he has stumbled onto some kind of revelation.

“I see, so you understand that this is for show. True, if you were to demonstrate your true strength, these goblins would be defeated in a flash. But that wouldn’t make for good entertainment, and thus the point of this exercise would be...”

The penguin continued mumbling to himself, then confusedly tilted his head.

“Furthermore, I cannot sense even the slightest hint of humiliation or anguish... I see, I see... So you intend to demonstrate that you can withstand any attack from a monster without having to lift a finger!”

The penguin, who seems to be having some kind of grave misunderstanding, shouted towards Darkness in a solemn voice.

Darkness, who was completely restrained by the goblins at this point, flashed a confident smile.

“I will not sully my blade with the blood of goblins. My sword does not exist to vanquish monsters at your leisure, Lord Zereschrute. It exist to protect this country!”

It sure sounds cool, but the truth is that she couldn't hit a goblin with her sword even if she wanted to.

“It would seem that mere goblins won't be able to bring out your true capabilities... Enough, goblins, you may retreat!”

Perhaps acknowledging the penguin as stronger than them, the goblins obediently released Darkness retreated out of the arena.

The penguin looked upon their retreating forms contentedly.

“Lady Dustiness, I should warn you.”

The penguin declared in an serious voice.

“What I'm about to release now can be said to be natural enemy of Crusaders. They might be close to extinct now, but they were once known as female knight killers, princess knight killers, and other such names. Yes, they are a legendary monster indeed.”

“W-What?”

With an expectant expression, Darkness asked in an excited voice.

The penguin seemed to take this as a sign of fear, and cheerfully continued

“Yes, you should at least know of the name. Monsters that are known as the enemy of all women...”

“Wait, the enemy of women? Don't tell me... A demon slime? Or perhaps a roper? No, wait, you said they are extinct.... Don't tell me, you—!”

Darkness's voice became shrill due to her excitement, and the penguin who seemed to be in much better spirits raised both his hands.

"Looks like like you have an idea of what's coming. The natural enemies of Crusaders, and a monster that was once as common as goblins!"

At that time, the cage attached to the arena slid open with the sound of metal sliding on metal.

"Come forth, pure-blooded male orc! Show us the strength that once struck fear into the hearts of women all over!"

What appeared was a monster once thought to be extinct, a male orc.

Two male orcs jumped out of the cage.

The two orcs regarded Darkness warily, who was trembling head to toe and blushing bright red.

"How could this be!? They were supposed to be extinct! To think that there are still male orcs left in this world...!"

Hearing Darkness excited scream, the penguin happily laughed.

"Mwahaha! Now, entertain me! Let me see what it looks like when a pair of lecherous orcs starved of female contact make a proud Crusader submit to them! Let me taste the best emotions of shame!"

Orc vs Female Knight.

How did this happen? We went on a quest to get ingredients to save a little girl, and now it's just one adventurer-like event happening one after the other!

Even though Darkness might end up facing a horrible fate, why am I feeling so excited?

Of course, I can't stand by and let something really bad happen, but Darkness herself will probably enjoy a little tormenting, so I suppose it's okay to continue observing for now.

"Dammit, how could this happen? I really want to step in, but if I do, all your previous efforts will be wasted. Hang in there, Darkness! Don't you dare lose to these orcs!"

“Why did you move all the way to the front seats? It’s true that having you interfere would be a problem, but hearing you get this excited is also a little...”

“Go forth, orcs!”

Hearing the order of the penguin, the two orcs looked at each other...

And immediately turned around, revealing a pig like tail as they ran as far away as they could from her.

“Hey, Darkness, what is this? Did you do something to those orcs!? You didn’t buy a bunch of orc children some time ago and did unspeakable things with them, did you?”

“Who would do such a thing!? Please stop treating me like some kind of slut! Anyway, these guys seem to be afraid of me for some reason.”

Just what’s going on?

“Hey, penguin, do your job and train them better!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you! Just what’s going on? Why are the orcs frightened?... Could it be the divine protection that Crusaders receive? Evil creatures like orcs must be able to sense that and be scared away by it.”

Hearing those words made something click in my head.

Oh, I see.

Those orcs must have been traumatized by female orcs when they were children.

“Enough, seems like you two won’t be able to deal with her. You may stand down.”

Hearing the words of the penguin, the orcs beat a hasty retreat.

“What’s wrong, Lord Zereschrute? Weren’t you going to bring me to my knees? Is that all I can expect from the Lord of Brutality!? You disappoint me!”

“Grr...”

Darkness taunted the penguin, her face flush with frustration after having her expectations dashed.

She probably already forgot why she originally stepped into the arena.

“Fufufu...Mwahahaha! I underestimated you, Lady Dustiness! It seems like neither goblins nor orcs will get us anywhere. Very well, allow me to handle this personally!”

Is he serious!?

“Hey, are you seriously going to fight in that costume? Isn't it too early to give up? Come on, you still have a few more dangerous monsters, right? If you have orcs in your bestiary, you must have some demon slimes or ropers or something, right!?”

“Well, it's true that I may have such monsters at my disposal, but if she's still resolute even after seeing evil creatures like orcs, I doubt monsters on that level will do much better. After all... I've not sensed even a hint of fear or dread coming from Lady Dustiness.”

No, they'll work. They'll definitely work.

Such creatures will definitely be very effective on her from her

But the penguin casually leaped down into the arena.

“Wha—!?”

Darkness let out a squeak of surprise in response to the sudden appearance of the penguin.

“Now, show me your power, Lady Dustiness! I'll bring you to your knees and feast on your delicious dark emotions!”

The penguin charged at Darkness with both arms raised—!

“... There's nothing I can say.”

“Yeah, really.”

Having left Count Zereschrute’s castle, a dejected Darkness and I were riding the carriage back to town to find a place to spend the night.

“... I didn’t expect you and that devil to be so compatible.”

I said while sitting next to Darkness.

“... There’s nothing I can say.”

“Yeah, there really isn’t.”

Zereschrute, the Lord of Brutality.

He truly does live up to his name once he starts fighting.

“... I didn’t expect you to actually forget that I was there and thoroughly enjoy it...”

“Hey, don’t make it sound so obscene! That’s a first for me too! To think that he could be hiding something so hideous under that cute exterior...”

During the battle between the penguin and Darkness, the penguin unzipped the zipper on it’s back, and from within popped out...

“Well, I did end up seeing something amazing, so I guess it’s fine...”

“Please forget about it! Ugh, first Vanir and now Lord Zereschrute, I really hate dealing with devils!”

For the sake of her honour, maybe it’s best that I don’t remember what happened.

“It’s good that devils have no gender, otherwise...”

“Didn’t you say you liked me just a short while ago...?”

In the face of my reproachful gaze, Darkness averted her eyes.

Still, what should we do now?

That penguin was trying to make Darkness feel fear, but instead she ended up joyous beyond belief.

After being unable to get the dark emotions that he desired, he eventually lost interest and sent us away.

Judging from how things stand, it's unlikely that he'll give us another chance to negotiate...

Just when I was troubled over such matters, I spotted the figure of a familiar thief ahead.

"Hey, Darkness, look at that."

"... Really, there's nothing I can say... Is that Chris? What's she doing here?"

The silver-haired figure who was waving at us while running towards our carriage is indeed my Big Boss, Chris.

I have no idea why she would appear in this town.

Chris ran over to the still dejected Darkness and,

"Hey there, your old pal has come to help out."

Greeted her with a bright smile on her face.

Chapter 6 : Granting Eris Divine Protection upon this Crusader

“Assistant-kun, Assistant-kun! Look! There’s a really big inn over there! Shall we stay there tonight?”

Chris, who has been in high spirits since she joined up with us, said cheerfully.

“Big Boss, do you have the money to stay in such a fancy place? I always got the impression that you’re the kind of person who quickly blows away all your money the moment you get it.”

Chris and I were sitting in the back of the carriage, looking around for a good inn to spend the night as Darkness handled the horses.

“Of course not. I donated most of my money to the Eris Church and drank the rest.”

“That’s no good, Big Boss. Then what are you going to do about tonight?”

In response, she gave me a glowing smile.

“Oh, Assistant-kun, are we really that distant? Haven’t we ran around the city at night together? We’re already close friends, aren’t we? Such close friends should of course sleep in the same place!”

In other words, ‘please handle my lodging fees for tonight.’

Well, I don’t particularly mind doing so, but Darkness interrupted before I could give my reply.

“I’ll cover Chris’ lodging fees. You did rush all the way here from Axel to help, after all... Still, Chris, it’s not bad to be so devoted to Eris-sama, but for the sake of your future, you should at least consider saving up some money.”

“Yay! Thanks, Darkness! Yeah, I’ll think a little more about my future from now on.”

Saying that, Chris hugged Darkness around the neck from behind.

“You don’t need to thank me. You’re the person I’m most worried about. I have my family estate, Kazuma here has both a mansion and a fortune. Aqua and Megumin can rely on him for their daily fees. But what about you, Chris? You don’t have a fixed home nor do you have any savings. Sure, it’s

very adventurer-like, but maybe you should consider moving together with us...”

“N-No, I’ll be fine, Darkness. I might not look like it, but I have plenty of places to stay, so I can get by somehow.”

Chris slightly averted her gaze after being lectured by Darkness.

“Tell me how exactly do you plan to ‘get by’!? You’re not planning on breaking the law again, are you? If you get caught, I can’t just let you be. It might be different in the past, but right now I have to use my authority in a just manner. Please don’t make me have to do that.”

“What happened, Darkness? Why would the hardheaded Darkness say something like that? Hey, it’s your fault, isn’t it? You were the one who led her astray! Give her back! Return my earnest, hardheaded and easily fooled Darkness to me!”

“Don’t blame me, Big Boss. She’s always been a little shot in the head.”

—While we were fooling around in front of the gates, the sound of a bell emerged from the town, signalling that it was evening.

“Hey, Big Boss, we should go stake the place out soon. And now that I think about it, we don’t really need a place to stay. There’s a girl who needs the medicine as soon as possible, so we should leave as soon as we are done here.”

Now that Chris is here, our next course of action is clear.

Obviously, that would be...

“Uuu, do I have no choice but to be an accomplice to a crime...? Me, personally...”

Darkness, who has been agonizing over this for quite some time, buried her face in her hands and grumbled.

“Now, now, Darkness, this is necessary in order to save a girl’s life, right? Then we don’t have a choice. I do feel a little sorry for this Lord Zereschrute guy, but we need those ingredients.”

Chris patted Darkness on the shoulder.

Regarding why Chris is here...

According to the person in question, it's just because she felt like it.

But I know that Darkness prayed at the Eris church before she left on the journey.

In other words...

"Big Boss, you really do take good care of your flock."

"...? I don't really get it, but thank you?"

By the way, if you are wondering why Chris is so calm even though we are about to infiltrate a devil's castle, that'll be because we still haven't told her the true identity of that penguin.

Darkness mentioned that Chris has this weird tendency to fly into an uncharacteristic rage whenever she sees an undead or devil, so we should try and keep it a secret.

Knowing Chris' true identity, it'd be really troublesome if she were to turn this grab-and-dash into a devil extermination mission, so I agreed.

"Anyway, Big Boss, please stop looking around like that. You aren't a country bumpkin, you know? Plus, your silver hair is really distinctive."

Perhaps because it's been some time since she's been in a party, Chris has been oddly energetic and was looking around with amazement like a person from the countryside who's just caught her first glimpse of the big city.

"I've been curious about it for some time, but when did the two of you get this close to each other? You two even formed some kind of thieving band before I realized it. I don't recall you having that much contact with each other..."

In response to Darkness's probing question, Chris flashed her a cheeky grin and prodded her in the shoulder.

"What's the matter, Darkness? Does the relationship I have with Assistant-kun bother you? Come to think of it, I still haven't asked how far you got with Assistant-kun, right? I wouldn't mind answering your question if you are willing to answer mine."

Hearing Chris' unnecessary comments, Darkness glanced at me and blushed.

Seeing that reaction, Chris pulled me aside and whispered.



“Hey, Assistant-kun, Assistant-kun, Darkness is acting really strange. Just what did you do?”

As expected of Darkness’s old pal, she picked up on our awkwardness quickly.

“I didn’t do anything. In fact, we are so awkward *because* I didn’t do anything. Simply put, Darkness confessed to me, but I rejected her because things have been going well between Megumin and me.”

“Eeh? You rejected Darkness!?”

I could see the reins start to tremble in Darkness’s hand.

“Big Boss, you’re way too loud! We are awkward enough as it is, so why do you need to say that!?”

“But... But...!”

I couldn’t see Darkness’s face from behind, but I think her ears are a little redder than before.

Yeah, look at what you’ve done! She’s definitely still worried about it!

“Assistant-kun, does that mean you’re going out with Megumin?”

Chris excitedly asked as she brought her face closer to mine.

“No, right now we are more than friends, but not yet lovers, I think.”

“What does that even mean? How far did you go with her? Have you kissed her yet?”

What’s with this goddess?

Why is she so interested in matters of romance?

Darkness must have been interested in our whisperings too. She’s been resolutely staring forwards and focusing on the reins ever since we started on this topic, but I still saw her ears perk at Chris’s questions.

“I didn’t do anything with Megumin yet...”

Though we did share a bath, held hands, and hugged each other in the same futon...

“I’m surprised. I always thought Assistant-kun was more unrestrained, the kind who would eat a girl up if given a chance.”

Well, sorry for giving off that kind of impression.

It’s just that I don’t have the resolve to take responsibility and go all the way with her yet.

“I see, so Darkness still has a chance, right?”

“No, I’m a pretty faithful man, you know? Even if you try and fan the flames like that...”

Yeah, it was really hard for me to reject her.

To be honest, I wanted to cry.

... No, considering the stuff we got up to immediately afterwards, I suppose I really can’t say that.

Smiling from ear to ear, Chris said,

“But you are the surprisingly responsible type, aren’t you? If you cross a line here, you’ll take responsibility, right? Then, if Darkness properly kisses you now, not on the cheek but a proper kiss, then you...”

She said while nudging me with her elbow.

“I have already kissed Darkness. On the lips.”

“Wait, what!? Didn’t you have a thing going on with Megumin!? You haven’t done anything with her, but you have done that with Darkness? What does that mean? I’m still young so I don’t really understand what you adults are saying!”

Ignoring Chris’ shocked reactions,

“Hey, Darkness, doesn’t that spot look like a good place to stop this carriage? It seems to be pretty secluded.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s fine.”

“Hey, don’t just ignore me! Tell me! Hey, Darkness, we’re old pals, right? So tell me exactly what happened that led to you kissing him!”

“Kazuma, just what are you telling her!? Please don’t ask any more about that, Chris!”

Darkness said in a panic as her face once again turned bright red.

After stopping the carriage, Chris continued bombarding Darkness with questions.

Then Darkness returned the favour by asking Chris about what she usually gets up to, and thus time passed.

And now...

Under the cover of the night, we once again approached Count Zereschrute’s castle.

After sneaking into all sorts of places with with Chris, I think I’ve gotten used to infiltrating buildings like this.

What is the best way to get into this castle...

Just as I’m considering that, Darkness, who had her face hidden with a handkerchief like Chris, tugged on my shirt.

“Hey, Kazuma, just what are you agonizing over? We have already come this far, so let’s go. The children are suffering as we speak... I’ve already prepared myself mentally, so stop dragging your feet and go.”

Darkness nervously whispered into my ear.

Darkness has removed her heavy armour. Clad only in the slightly erotic black bodysuit that she wears underneath, she looks much more like a burglar than we do.

“Okay, Darkness, we are professionals. Regarding such matters, you are a newcomer, so you need to listen to what we professionals say.”

“Yeah, Darkness, you’re a noble lady, so you aren’t too familiar with such stuff, right? Don’t worry, leave it to Chris-san. After all, Assistant-kun and I were the ones who successfully broke into the royal castle.”

We confidently declared, but Darkness gave us a doubtful look.

“Sure, you infiltrated the castle, but didn’t you end up getting chased all over the place?”

In response, Chris flusteredly pointed at me.

“That’s because Assistant-kun...”

“Big Boss, now’s not the time to reminiscence about the past. Even as we speak, the children are...”

“That’s true, but I don’t want to hear it from you!”

Ignoring Chris making a fuss, I activated Farsight and began searching for a good infiltration route.

The castle is surrounded by high walls, the main gate is tightly shut, and there doesn’t seem to be anything that looks like a back door.

We can’t possibly dig underneath those walls to get into the castle, so that leaves...

“Big Boss, did you bring a rope?”

“Of course. Ropes are the best friend of thieves.”

I nodded with Chris and we both pulled out a rope from somewhere.

“Do the two of you normally walk around with those things? No, I suppose you brought them because you knew we’d be sneaking in...”

“That’s not it, a thief needs to have something like this on hand at all times.”

Darkness seemed to be taken aback after hearing Chris’s words.

“Big Boss, Darkness is a sheltered lady, so what’s common sense for us may not seem like it to her...”

“Ah, right, sorry, Darkness.”

Darkness doesn’t seem fully convinced after hearing our exchange, but she still quietly followed after us.

There are gatekeepers at the gate, but they won't be able to monitor the entirety of the outer wall at once.

We went around to the back of the castle, attached our ropes to grappling hooks, and threw them over the wall. A quick pull confirmed they were properly secured.

Darkness seems to be impressed after observing our actions.

"You seem pretty skilled at this."

Hearing Darkness's compliments, Chris and I each grabbed our own ropes and started climbing...

"Damnit, the rope's too slippery to climb!"

"Assistant-kun, given the strength of my arms, it'd be pretty difficult to get over this wall."

"Big Boss, let's tie some knots into the ropes. That'll give us some handholds and make it easier to climb."

Seeing us fussing over the rope,

"Hey, you two, I think I'll be able to climb up just like that with my strength. Should I go up first and pull you two up?"

Darkness timidly made such a suggestion.

"Hey, Darkness, a newbie like you shouldn't just say whatever comes to mind."

"Yeah, Darkness, a moment of carelessness could cost you your life. You don't have experience, so it might seem easier than it actually is to you. Just leave it to us."

"I-is that so? Sorry, I shouldn't have interrupted."

Still, if she's this motivated...

Respecting her enthusiasm, we ended up sending her up first.

Having climbed all the way up using only her strength, Darkness then pulled us up.

Thus having safely gotten onto the walls, we warily approached the castle.

“Right, then, Darkness, follow behind us.”

“Big Boss and I both possess the Lurk skill, but you obviously can’t use it, so don’t let go of my hand, okay?”

“O-Okay!”

Darkness obediently grabbed my hand.

“Right, since you’re my underling for this mission, you can call me Kazuma-senpai.”

“Kazuma-senpai.”

“Yeah, just like that.”

Hey, that actually sounds pretty nice.

“Darkness, can you say that again?”

“Ka-Kazuma-senpai.”

“Hey, Assistant-kun, stop fooling around and let’s go already.”

Chris butted in after I made Darkness call me that several times.

“Big Boss, didn’t you ask me to do a similar thing when I first became your underling?”

“This and that are different matters. Anyway, let’s hurry on, Assistant-kun.”

Having regained my composure, I explained to Darkness,

“Listen up, newbie. Around this time, the master of the place will most likely be at the higher floors. Most big shots and bosses prefer to live in high places.”

In response to my flawless explanation, Chris silently nodded in agreement.

“No, I’ve visited this castle many times before. Lord Zereschrute should be sleeping close to the arena where the monsters are. Let’s head there first.”

And the newbie Darkness said such a thing...

“Right, Darkness, what we just told you is what to expect in general. Of course, we are aware of where the master of this castle currently is. We have the Enemy Detection skill, after all.”

Chris once again nodded along to my words.

“I-is that so? Sorry, I once again said something unnecessary.”

Darkness hurriedly apologized.

“No, that’s fine. You’re new to this, so it’s to be expected. And there are times when a newcomer can offer a fresh perspective on things. It’s fine to voice out if you think something amiss. Right, then, let’s head to the basement... Wait, before that...”

There’s a door barring our entry into the castle proper.

While there’s a gatekeeper at the main gate, I can’t detect the presence of anyone behind this door.

Is it because there’s no need for such stringent security measures when you are in a remote town like this? Or is it because there’s no need for a devil to be so guarded?

“This is my turn to shine. I’ll have it open in a jiffy with my Lockpicking skill.”

Chris confidently said as she approached the door...

“Assistant-kun, this is bad! There’s no keyhole on this door!”

“Are you serious, Big Boss? What should we do now? This isn’t a magic door that can only be opened with a password or something, is it?”

Having run into such an unexpected obstacle, we discussed in whispers.

Just then,

“No, for these kinds of doors, you need to do this...”

Moving past us, Darkness lifted the door.

“It’s a lifting door commonly found in old castles. It’s extremely heavy and requires someone strong enough to lift it in order to enter, so it’s quite efficient at deterring thieves... W-what’s wrong, you two?”

Seeing that the two of us have fallen silent, Darkness gave us a puzzled look.

“Hey Darkness, what would you have done if there was a trap? It’s only because of my high luck that it wasn’t trapped this time, but...”

“Yeah, Darkness. What were you thinking, just carelessly opening that door like that? It’s only because you’re with the luckiest person in Axel that it isn’t trapped.”

“S-sorry. I really didn’t think of that.”

Darkness apologized.

“No, it’s fine. You are new this this, after all. But, maybe you should lead the way from now on.”

“Yeah, you’re the newbie, but we’ll let you take the lead just for this time. Don’t worry, we professionals will be supporting you from behind.”

“R-really? If you say it’s okay...”

Darkness tilted her head and moved to the front.

Afterwards, relying only on the faint lights and her memories from past visits, Darkness steadily lead us towards the basement.

“Assistant-kun, Assistant-kun, aren’t we just in the way?”

“Big Boss, there’ll still be chances for us to shine. At the end of the day, Darkness is still a little bit of an airhead. As pros, we need to properly support her.”

Though I feel like I’ve been the one being supported thus far.

And, at that moment, Chris and I immediately froze in place.

That’s because we could detect the presence of monsters ahead of us.

Come to think of it, that penguin was ordering the monsters around back then.

The security outside the castle is being handled by normal human soldiers, but it seemed like the inside of the castle is being guarded by monsters.

“Hey, Darkness, monsters are guarding the staircase ahead of us. You won’t be able to hit them, so Big Boss and I will handle them. You keep an eye out for anyone else approaching.”

“I got it! Let me see what you can do!”

We gave the excited and expectant Darkness a thumbs up before activating the Lurk skill and slowly creeping forward to where the monsters were hiding.

And what awaited us was...

“Assistant-kun, Assistant-kun! Those are orcs! They are the male orcs that were thought to have been exterminated a long time ago. Is it really okay to kill them?”

These are probably the very same ones who were traumatised by female orcs in the past.

Two orcs who are bad with dealing with humanoid women are standing in front of us.

“If possible, I’d really want to avoid killing such noble creatures.”

“Noble creatures? What’s up with that? ... But I get it. I’ll deal with them. You told me those orcs have trouble dealing with women, right? Then I’ll go ahead and use bind on them, Assistant-kun and Darkness, you two keep a lookout. ”

Saying that, Chris retrieved a rope from her waist...

The moment she appeared in front of them, the orcs pounced upon her.

“Assistant-kun! Help me, Assistant-kun!”

The orcs who caught her quickly got to work stripping her of her equipment.

“That wasn’t what you told me, Assistant-kun! Weren’t these orcs supposed to have trouble dealing with women? Wait, don’t! Stop! Assistant-kun! Darkness! I’m getting stripped!”

In order to save Chris who had been stripped down to her shirt and pants, Darkness and I charged in.



“Uuu... Thank you, just a little more and it would’ve been....”

Having been stripped down to her undies, Chris quietly sobbed in a corner. Next to her, the orcs lay trussed up after having been subdued by my Bind skill.

“These guys started shivering in fear after seeing Darkness charge in to rescue you, so they are definitely still afraid of women. Is it because Chris resembled a boy that they...”

“Shh! Don’t say anything more, Kazuma! Come on, Chris, it’s okay now, so let’s get dressed.”

While saying that, Darkness started gathering up Chris’s equipment.

“Uuu... Darkness... I can’t get married anymore...”

“Don’t worry, Chris, those are monsters so that didn’t count. They don’t count.”

The slightly envious glances that Darkness was giving the bound up orcs while she said that does bother me somewhat, but leaving that aside...

“Anyway, thanks to Big Boss’s sacrifice, the path to the basement is open. So, come on, let’s hurry on.”

Even though it’s in the middle of the night, the basement seemed brighter than it was when we were here in the afternoon. Additionally, I could detect the presence of monsters wandering all over the place.

“Hey, Assistant-kun, isn’t this castle a little strange? You two mentioned that he’s a nobleman who enjoys keeping monsters, but isn’t it odd for him to let orcs guard his doorways? And I’ve been detecting the presence of monsters wandering all over the place. This really doesn’t feel like they are being kept in cages...”

Well, yeah, that’s because this castle is owned by a devil.

“There’s a reason for that, but I’ll leave it for later. Anyway, we should avoid getting into conflicts from here on out.”

Most likely, the penguin is hanging out all the way at the back like a proper dungeon boss.

After confirming that Darkness acknowledged my suggestion, we proceeded to sneak along the hallway.

“Even with Enemy Detection telling us their position and Lurk allowing us to hide, I didn’t expect to be able to slip through without fighting a single battle...”

Darkness whispered in an amazed voice.

“Things are progressing smoothly, aren’t they? What do you think, Darkness? This is what happens when Big Boss and I work together.”

“Right, Assistant-kun, with our high luck, it’s only natural that things will progress like so when the two of us are together.”

...

“... But didn’t you run into problems climbing the wall? And when you ran into that door, and when you tried to fight those orcs, and...”

“Hey, Darkness, don’t say anything more. Everybody makes mistakes. You too have been staying awake at night because letting Sylphina contract that disease on the journey to Axel and spreading that disease to the other children has been eating away at you, right? Yeah, everyone makes mistakes. The question is whether you let those mistakes get you down or you pick yourself up and fix those mistakes like we do.”

“Yeah, Assistant-kun is right! It doesn’t matter if you make mistakes along the way as long as everything works out in the end. So you shouldn’t let it get you down, Darkness.”

In the face of our encouragement, Darkness teared up.

“You two... Yeah, now’s not the time to wallow in my despair. Bringing back the ingredient comes first...”

...

“... Hey, wait a minute. Yeah, I was a little depressed over making such a mistake, but I don’t think that is really relevant to what we were talking about...”

“Darkness, quiet down. Seems like there’s only a single path ahead. Could it be that the penguin count’s room lies at the end of this hallway?”

“Yeah, it certainly feels like there’s a boss room ahead. That’s what my intuition as a veteran thief is telling me.”

“Indeed, Lord Zereschrute’s room should be right ahead... Still, I can’t shake the feeling that you two have been playing tricks on me...”

Leaving the Darkness who was mumbling about something incomprehensible to cover our backs, Chris and I activated our Lurk skill and snuck forward.

Eventually...

After passing through the sinister feeling hallway, we wound up face to face with a large, pitch black door that had an extremely ominous air around it.

Darkness and I nodded at each other and pressed our ears to the door.

Chris pulled on my shirt and whispered.

“Hey, Assistant-kun, is this really the castle of an evil aristocrat? Between the door and the hallway, I can’t help but feel like this place is more suitable for a general of the Demon King’s Army...”

Being still ignorant of Lord Zereschrute’s true identity, Chris casually voiced her opinion.

“Well, it’s not really accurate to call him an evil aristocrat, but... In any case, if we don’t retrieve a certain item that this lord has in his possession, the life of the girl will be at risk. That hasn’t changed.”

“It’s just as Kazuma said, Chris. The goal of this mission is bring back the ingredient we need to brew the antidote. Just focus on that, Chris... Really, please, don’t lose your head here.”

“Hey, what’s wrong? Why are you warning me so many times? Just what’s behind this door?”

Ignoring Chris who had a worried expression, Darkness and I nodded...

We kicked open the door and rushed inside!

Our opponent is a devil.

Even this late at night, there's no way that he'd be asleep.

That means that the best way to deal with him would be to take him by surprise and resolve things before he could gather his wits.

The moment we barged in, we found the penguin standing in the middle of the room, waiting for us. Perhaps some devilish skill has warned him about our coming in advance.

"Welcome, mysterious intruders! I'm sure you are well aware of what this place is! Fufu, you mysterious intruders who I'm meeting for the first time."

This was a little outside my expectations.

I expected him to at least remove his suit when he was resting alone in his room. Was I naive in thinking so?

In this case, we'll have to find a way to force him out of his costume before trying to chip off a piece of his nails.

And judging from his words, he most likely...

"Dammit, he knows who we really are!"

Chris let out a scream upon seeing the penguin.

"Hey, Assistant-kun, what do I do? Is this what you were repeatedly warning me about? It's impossible! There's no way I'd be able to attack something this cute! Just no way!"

No, that's not what we meant at all!

"Hey, Chris, don't let your guard down! It may look cute, but there's something truly horrific hiding inside! Our goal is to get a fragment of his nail! His nail is a vital ingredient in creating the antidote to Colorin disease!"

Hearing that, Chris suddenly stopped moving.

"Nails that are used in the creation of the antidote to Colorin disease..."

As if she realized what that ingredient is, a solemn expression suddenly appeared on her face.

"Oh yeah, Chris, use bind to restrain Lord Zereschrute! I'll block all his fierce attacks with my body!"

Saying that, Darkness stepped in front of us.

“As expected of the intruder who looks just like a certain shield of this country! Your resolve is admirable indeed! But how long can a mere human withstand my true strength, I wonder...?”

Just as the penguin confidently said that and struck a dramatic pose.

Before Darkness or I could react, the penguin—

—Was set upon by Chris, who closed the distance within the blink of an eye and drove her dagger deep into the penguin’s body with both hands.

“AAAAAAH!? Wait, don’t—!”

The screaming penguin battered Chris off his body, before hastily pulling the dagger out and tossing it aside.

Instead of blood, black smoke hissed from the rip in his suit where the dagger had been.

“He-Hey, Chris, what are you doing? Just use Bind on him! We just need a piece of his nail, we don’t need to kill him! Actually, no, if you kill him, his body will be sent back to hell. If that were to happen, we won’t be able to retrieve that all important nail fragment that we need.”

Oh, yeah, Aqua mentioned that Eris hates undead and devils even more than she does.

Despite having been sent flying by the penguin, Chris leapt to her feet.

I grabbed both of her arms from behind.

“Hey, Assistant-kun! What are you doing!?”

“What are you doing!? That’s my line! Don’t forget what we came here for! What we need is his nail!”

Hearing my words, Chris seems to finally snap back to her senses.

“Oh, right! We need to remove one of his nails before killing him!”

No, that’s not it! We don’t need to kill him at all!

Ignoring my thoughts, Chris kept her eye focused on the penguin.

“What’s with this berserk little kid!?”

“I’m a woman!”

Hearing Chris’s spirited reply, the Penguin shuddered.

“Who cares if you are a guy or a girl! Is that a magic dagger? Or is it a cursed item? I can feel an extremely strong bloodlust towards devils emanating from that dagger! Just touching it causes me to go numb!”

“I would prefer to say that it has received a divine blessing! This is a powerful dagger specifically enchanted to deal with devils like you!”

Saying that, Chris picked up the dagger and got back into a combat stance.

“You crazy girl! Why do you have such a strong hatred for devils?!”

The penguin turned his back on us, and reached for his zipper.

“Crap, he’s trying to reveal his true body!”

Seeing that, Darkness threw herself at the penguin’s back and wrapped her arms around its neck, covering the zipper with her entire body.

It’s almost like seeing a girl play with a stuffed doll, but this is far from a game.

“I’ll restrain him with Bind! Big Boss, can you cut off the tip of his flippers!?”

Knowing what’s hiding inside, I know that it’d be extremely dangerous to allow him to pull his true body out of his suit.

I prepared my custom-ordered wire.

“Don’t worry about me, Kazuma! Restrain him along with me!”

“Bind!”

I restrained the penguin as Darkness instructed.

“Y-You little—!”

Being bound together with Darkness, the penguin desperately tried to reach for his zipper with his flippers.

At that moment...

“Ah!....Ah!”

Darkness couldn't bear it and let out such a voice.

A black tentacle-like thing emerged from the rip left by Chris's dagger, and spurted some kind of liquid onto Darkness's back.

The sound of something burning could be heard from the moment it made contact with her bodysuit, accompanied by a whole lot of smoke.

I pulled out the shortsword that I hardly had the chance to use after buying it from my waist and slashed at it.

The tentacle that was burning Darkness's back was severed and started flopping all over the place like a lizard's tail.

“Assistant-kun, this devil is really disgusting!”

“It's best that you don't see what's inside, then! It's far more disgusting!”

Actually, where does this demon keep his nails?

Looking at the severed tentacle flopping around, I couldn't see anything that resembled a claw.

“Darkness, please hang in there for just a while longer. I'll get his nails-!”

Saying that, Chris slashed at the tip of the penguin's wings with her dagger!

“AAAAAAAHH! Curse you! Would you stop using that dagger!?”

A pair of black tentacles emerged, one from the old tear in the suit and one from the freshly made hole at the tip of its wings, and shot towards Chris who went to pick up the severed wing tip.

But...!

“Hey, the only things tentacles are allowed to attack are Crusaders! This has been a rule since ancient times!”

Darkness, who was still bound to the penguin, trust her hands into both openings.

The sound of something burning can be heard.

At that moment, Chris, who went to check on the contents of the severed wingtip...

“Darkness, we have it! The nail of a devil! Assistant-kun, how long do you think your Bind will last?”

Chris joyfully exclaimed.

“I-I put my all into that Bind, so it probably will last for quite some time...”

“Darkness! I’ll cut that wire with my dagger, so hang on!”

Chris threw the severed wingtip to me in a panic, and slashed at the wire with her dagger-

“Sorry, that’s the special mithril alloy wire that I commissioned...”

“Aaaah, come on, why!?”

As the sound of something burning continues to fill the air, Darkness smiled at Chris who seemed to be on the verge of tears,

“Chris, I’ll be fine! More importantly, the two of you, take that nail and go!”

And suddenly said something so unsuited to her.

“Don’t worry, the Count knows who I am. He might vent his frustration on me, but he won’t kill me. Forget about me, hurry up and go!”

Darkness desperately said while sweating heavily from her forehead.

On the verge of tears, Chris raised her dagger.

“If I stab it with this dagger...”

“The more you stab it, the more tentacles he will be able to bring out! Just listen to her, Big Boss. Go bring the carriage over, there’s something I want to try.”

Saying that, I retrieved something from my bag.

It’s something that Aqua gave me after hearing that the guy is a diabolic acquaintance of Vanir.

“Assistant-kun, Darkness! Hang in there! I’ll be back very soon!”

Saying that, Chris flew out of the room!

“Darkness, I don’t care which one, just pull one of your hands out. I’ll take this chance to pour Aqua’s juice down the hole!”

“I-I got it. But you shouldn’t force yourself to stay! Hurry up and go! Even I won’t be able to hold out against such a strong opponent for long...!”

“Wha—Stop! What is this!? It hurts! My body is melting!

Even under such circumstances, Darkness still had an elated expression on her face.

And me who stayed behind to pour Aqua’s water into the suit...

“Darkness, show me your resolve! Show me that your stamina will not lose to any devil!”

“Leave it to me! Now, Lord Zereschrute, I might have lost to you this afternoon, but allow me to show you my true power!”

“Hey, why is this girl feeling elated? Is she crazy!? She’s crazy! She must be knocked in the head somewhere!”

After returning to Axel, we headed straight for the orphanage without taking any detours.

“Assistant-kun, Assistant-kun, Senpai’s at the orphanage, right? I have, you know... something urgent to attend to...”

Ah, I see.

There would be some kind of problem if you met up with her.

Though I find it extremely unlikely for that airheaded girl to figure out your true identity...

“Alright, I’ll pass your regards to everyone. You really helped us out, Big Boss.”

“Yeah, I’ll be going now.. Make sure this girl doesn’t push herself too far. And...”

Chris gently patted the soundly sleeping Darkness on the head.

“It’d be nice if I could tell her my true identity someday...”

Saying that, Chris shyly stood up and left.

—As Darkness held him down, I poured Aqua’s juice into the suit and somehow managed to pry her off the penguin after she fell unconscious.

At that moment, Eris-sama arrived and gave the devil the beating of his life.

It’s really hard to described what happened next. To be honest, I’m not sure what exactly took place.

Though there’s one thing I can be certain of; Eris-sama is really scary when she gets mad.

Lord Zereschrute was so eager to escape from the suit earlier, but the moment Eris-sama showed up he crawled back in and desperately tried to prevent his zipper from being opened, only for Eris-sama to casually pull him out. I could only watch their battle with amazement.

Even though Eris-sama consumed countless numbers of that devil’s lives, in the end, his only sin was being born a devil. Since he has not performed any evil deeds, Eris-sama eventually spared him from being completely erased from this world.

Then, Eris-sama turned back into Chris, and after loading the sleeping Darkness onto the carriage, traveled with us back to Axel-

—With the exhausted Darkness on my back, I opened the door to the orphanage

“I’ve brought back the ingredient we need! Hey, Aqua, please see to Darkness’s wounds! Is Sylphina still....”

What greeted me after opening the door was...

“Welcome home, Mommy!”

What is going on?

Sylphina came over to greet us with a bright smile on her face.

“Hey.”

Wait, just what is going on?

Why is this girl so energetic?

...At that time.

“Ah, Aah, Aaah!”

Darkness let out a joyous voice and I felt warm tears start rolling down my back.

It seems like she regained consciousness some time ago, and upon seeing this situation...

She leapt off my back and wrapped Sylphina in a hug.

“Well, Darkness seems to be pretty happy, so I guess it’s a good thing, but...”

Aqua emerged from under a futon in the middle of the room, which was surrounded by all kinds of offerings for some inexplicable reason.

“Oh, you’re back! Come and see how energetic these children are!”

Just what happened while we were gone?

Why is Vanir carrying a child on his back, why is Wiz slightly translucent and lying on the ground, and why is Megumin collapsed lifelessly over one of the tables...?

“You’re back. Welcome home.”

Megumin tiredly said as she lay on the table, just barely raising her head to face me.

“I managed to bring back the ingredients, but what’s up with this horrible scene?”

“Well... This is the result after Aqua got serious and repeatedly cast her healing magic trying to save the children. They were given far more vitality than they needed to beat the disease, and ended up far more energetic than anyone expected. As you can see, the results are...”

Hey, if that’s the case, wouldn’t things be fine even if we didn’t get the ingredient?

As I was thinking that, Vanir, who was piggybacking a child and entertaining him with some kind of rattle, said to me.

“Seems like all the ingredients have been assembled. If it weren’t for this woman’s efforts, most of the children in the orphanage would’ve been half dead by now. That muscle lady’s daughter might look healthy, but her body is still in a dreadful state, so it’s best to start brewing immediately. If it weren’t for this woman, you would’ve been cutting it close... Hey, storekeeper, it’s your turn to shine!”

Hearing the news from Vanir, I immediately retrieved the nail I got from the penguin and handed it over to Megumin.

“Great work, Darkness, Kazuma! Leave the rest to the number one genius of the Crimson Demons. Don’t worry, I spent many nights studying the recipe!”

—Brewing in progress—

“That’s wrong. You need to put this in first. I learnt that in school, so there’s no way I could be mistaken!”

“Nonsense! The knowledge of devils are the most accurate thing in this world! You can’t go wrong with following Moi’s instructions... Hey, you trouble-making woman, what did you just put in?”

“Don’t get in my way, you strange devil. What I just added it the Axis Cult’s Aqua water. With that, the effectiveness of the antidote will be massively boosted.”

“Why? Why do you always do something unnecessary!? Actually, what would you do if you accidentally touched the potion as it’s about to be completed and turned it into water!? Hurry up and get lost, you goddess of misfortune!”

“Everyone, as the owner of the magic shop, my recipe is obviously correct. Don’t worry, there aren’t any mistakes, so just follow my instructions!”

I opened the door of the orphanage,

“I don’t care what you guys do, just hurry it up!”

And angrily screamed at them.

Epilogue

A magical light shone brightly over the lake near Axel.

“EXPLOOOSION!”

The sound of the explosion echoed throughout the lake, accompanied with a blinding flash.

At the same time a large amount of water was blasted into the air, creating a rainbow over the lake.

“Wow...”

Sylphina let out an amazed voice as she observed the scene, while Darkness patted her head with a smile.

“How many points is that?”

“I feel that the shockwave today is a little weaker. Can I assume that you reduced its power for Sylphina’s sake, since she just recently recovered from her illness?”

For the sake of her pride, I confirmed with Megumin who has collapsed next to me.

“Precisely. A true master of explosive magic can obviously adjust its destructive power. It’s only natural to keep the audience in mind if they are present.”

“With respect to your love for explosion magic, and taking into account the needs of your audience... I give today’s explosion a full hundred points!

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Megumin repeatedly thanked me while still lying on the floor. Seeing this, Darkness gave me a flat look and said,

“Say, Kazuma, were you guys always doing this kind of stupid things?”

“Darkness, how could you call this stupid? You’re saying the same things as Aqua!”

“Exactly! Even if it’s you, I won’t forgive you if you keep saying that.”

Alongside me, Megumin indignantly shot back.

“Very well, I’ll accept that challenge, Megumin! Now, bring it on whenever you want!”

“Ah, wait, Darkness! How could you take advantage of me when I can’t move! Please stop! Ah, no, they’ll see my panties, stop pulling at my skirt! I’ll start calling you Lewdness like Kazuma does... Okay, I surrender! I surrender, so please stop! Kazuma, hurry up replenish my mana with Drain Touch!”

Unable to move a muscle, Megumin quickly surrendered to Darkness.

“By the way, where did Aqua go off to?”

“It seems like she realized she could use the shockwave from Explosion for fishing. Lately she’s always been rushing around to gather the fish that float up after each Explosion.”

“Thanks to her, we are probably going to have to use this spot for Explosions for some time. What a drag.”

We started preparing lunch while watching Aqua collect fish in the lake.

Today’s lunch is sandwiches.

Darkness and Sylphina grew jealous after learning that we had a picnic at this lake without them, so I specifically prepared those.

“Everyone, look! It’s a big haul today! I might even consider bringing one back as a souvenir to that ill-mannered demonic black furball.”

“That kid has grown picky as of late. She won’t eat raw fish or bland food. The other day, she followed me into the shower and started using Aqua’s laundry as a scratching post. I wonder what’s going on with her.”

“Wait a second, what did she do with my laundry? Why is that kid only hostile to me!?”

After sharing some of my mana with her, Megumin started skewering fish for the people present, while I got a fire going using Tinder and the firewood that Darkness gathered.

Sylphina acted like a child on a camping trip, and excitedly watched the fish as they grilled.

“I personally gathered these fishes, so obviously the biggest one would go to me.”

“Hold on, Aqua, while the one who gathered them might be you, but I’m the one who killed them. The biggest one should obviously go to the most capable in this party, me.”

“Umm, I’ll give you half of my fish... I can’t eat that much anyway...”

“That won’t do, Sylphina. Children need to eat more. Otherwise you’ll end up with nutrient-deficient body like Megumin.”

“Oh, now you’ve said it! Then let’s use strength to decide who receives the biggest fish! Bring it on! Come at me whenever you want!”

Watching the two of them squabbling like children, I retreated to a small hill a short distance away, intending to take a short nap before the fish is grilled.

And Darkness took a seat next to me, a smile playing on her face as she watched the two of them squabble.

“Thank you.”

Darkness softly said without looking at me.

“After boldly proclaiming that I will protect you back then, I ended up getting saved by you again.”

Despite the topic, Darkness seemed to have a jovial tone.

“This isn’t the first time it’s happened, and it’ll probably keep happening. Ah, I’m getting really tired of cleaning up after you all. Well, I did manage to save that girl, so I guess it’s fine. Plus, I did have an adventurer-like experience for once.”

I closed my eyes and putting my arms behind my head.

“...Just confirming, but you really aren’t a lolicon, right?”

“Do you want me to punch you!? Why don’t I use your body to demonstrate that I’m not a lolicon!?”

Seeing me bolt up, Darkness started giggling.

“You don’t have the guts to go through anyway.”

This little...

“There’s a very good reason why I don’t cross that line. I... no, all the men in this city have a very reliable companion.”

Yes, if I pay those onee-sans a visit...

“Is that so? Then I’ll wait till you wish to tell me. What kind of life you really led before you came here, where did you come from... and, while you’re at it, what Chris’ true identity is.”

Darkness casually said while still looking at the others...

“Eh? Wait, you were awake back when Chris said that?”

“Of course. I’m the Crusader with the strongest defensive power and stamina in this city. How could I stay unconscious for that long? I’m going to need to properly lecture Chris one of these days.”

Still averting her gaze, Darkness let out a small chuckle.

“...Ah, it seems I like you more than I thought...”

She said in a faraway voice and let out a bitter laugh.

... D-don’t say that, you’ll make me want to cry again.

“I-I, umm, Megumin...”

“I understand.”

She cut me off before I could say anything more.

“I’m older than you all, and a noble above that. I have no intention of tearing apart my friends by throwing a childish tantrum. I don’t want that to happen. But...”

While twirling her hair between her fingers, Darkness moved her face closer to me until she loomed over me.

“You can forgive a little bit of teasing, can’t you?”

“Y-You...”

Not just once, but twice!

Darkness had a mischievous ‘my prank just succeeded’ look on her face. I need to get a little payback for her leading me on once again.

“You need to pay more attention to the time and place. Look behind you.”

“?”

Hearing my words, Darkness turned around.

Standing there was a wide-eyed and trembling Sylphina, holding a pair of grilled fishes.

“Mo-Mommy, sorry, I...”

“W-Wait a minute, Sylphina, this is—”

And standing right next to her was Megumin, holding what’s probably my grilled fish, her eyes glowing a brilliant shade of red.

“While I did say that it’s fine to express your feelings, I didn’t recall allowing you to have a secret affair with him. Pushing your child onto someone else to have a tryst, just how much of a pervert are you!?”

“Bu-but... that’s...”

Once again ending up in such a situation, Darkness tried to explain while looking like she was on the verge of tears.

“I need to let everyone know... Darkness tried to force herself on Kazuma-san, I need to let everyone know...!”

“W-Wait, that’s not it! Well, it’s not exactly untrue but— Ah, Aqua! Get back here!”

Looking at Darkness frantically chase after Aqua as she headed towards the city, I couldn’t help but think out loud.

“Well, this doesn’t feel too bad. It’s like I’m the main character of a harem show. I’ve gone through plenty of hardships so far, but it seems like my luck is still pretty good.”

“This man...!”

I hope things will remain like this forever...



Short story 1: The Legendary Witch

On this day,

“Here you go, Kazuma-san. Black tea and some cookies. These cookies happen to be Aqua-sama’s favourite.”

I came to Wiz’ shop to see if there’s anything interesting going on, and was relaxing after being served tea and snacks.

“Sorry for making you deal with Aqua every day... Oh, this black tea is delicious. You must have used some good leaves. I’m used to living the celebrity life, so I know quite a bit about stuff like this.”

“S-Sorry, but I can only afford the cheapest black tea for this shop...”

Oops, looks like I’m still a long way from becoming a celebrity.

“I see, so it’s all about the person brewing the tea. Well done, Wiz. If your shop ever runs out of business, you can always become my maid.”

“Please don’t say such things, Kazuma-san! B-but, if that ever happens, I might take you up on your offer...”

I enjoyed this peaceful moment with Wiz. Then-

“There you are, Kazuma! Big news! We have big news!”

The door to the shop swung open, shattering our peaceful moment to pieces.

Two breathless Crimson Demons barged in, their red eyes shining with excitement.

“Kazuma-san, Wiz-san, sorry for intruding. Um, we were doing research on Mages who have the potential to be our future rivals, and...”

Megumin and Yunyun said simultaneously,

“The Ice Witch is in this very city!”

“She was the leader of a party that wanted to be known as the strongest adventurer group. Even though she isn’t a Crimson Demon, she’s an extremely skilled mage who could use all kinds of magic, including Advanced

Magic. She kills monsters and soldiers of the Demon King's Army without mercy, even if they begged for their lives. That's how she got her nickname – The Ice Witch."

Hearing Megumin say that with a serious expression, Wiz covered her face with both hands and her shoulders started shaking.

Your ears are turning red, Ice Witch-san.

"So... What happened to that witch? You don't even know who she is, do you?"

I say that, but I only just learnt about the amazing Ice Witch very recently.

Aqua should also be aware of it from the time Wiz and Vanir were telling us the story of their past adventures, but listening to them while eating snacks proved to be too difficult for her, and she fell asleep in the middle.

"About that, we know that she put her life on the line to challenge one of the Demon King's Generals, but after that, all traces of her vanished. Her name and personal information are being kept secret by the Adventurer's Guild, so all we know about her is that she's a woman."

After hearing Yunyun's story, Wiz collapsed onto the table.

I leaned closer to her and whispered,

"Hey, why don't they know it's you? They know that you were a famous adventurer, right?"

"The people in this town only know that I was a member of a high level party. And... While Megumin-san's story is slightly exaggerated, I can't say that it's wrong, so I'm afraid that they might become scared of me..."

While we were whispering, Megumin excitedly interjected.

"What are you two talking about there!? The Ice Witch is in this very town, you know!? That Ice Witch!"

"Why are you two so obsessed with her? What would you even do after meeting her? Ask her for an autograph?"

"The Ice Witch has such a cool name! I couldn't possibly ignore her! I want to challenge her to see if she's better than a Crimson Demon!"

Megumin replied.

“I-I don’t really agree with that, but I’m curious as to what kind of person she is...”

Hearing their replies, Wiz, on the verge of tears, looked at me and shook her head.

Looks like she didn’t want others to know about that.

I wanted to ask her why she told that story to Aqua, the famous gossip, if that’s the case, but now’s not the time.

“I’m sure the Ice Witch wanted to live a quiet and peaceful life in this town. Please leave her alone.”

“T-That’s right... And I heard that the Ice Witch is a really scary person!”

Wiz backed me up, but having to say these things about herself must have hurt her more than she expected, because tears practically spilled from her eyes.

“I-is that so? As a Crimson Demon, I wanted to settle this...”

“H-hey Megumin, Wiz-san has good common sense, so maybe we should heed her words. I’m sure that rumour about her was true...”

It almost sounded like Yunyun doesn’t think that I have good common sense, but I’ll let it slide for now.

“What rumour are you talking about? It might have been greatly exaggerated, you know?”

Once again, Wiz nodded in affirmation of my words.

“...Because all the other members of her party have paired up, the Ice Witch was left single, so she cursed this world and launched a suicide attack on the Demon King’s castle...”

“I heard that the Ice Witch was slaughtering monsters to vent her frustrations over being unable to find a boyfriend. Well, in any case...”

Both Crimson Demons turned to the crying Wiz and dealt the finishing blow.

“She must look really ugly if she was passed over within her party and had such a scary nickname. That’s how the rumour goes...”

—Later that day, news that the rumoured Ice Witch is the owner of a certain magic shop in Axel spread throughout the guild.

Short story 2: The True Aspect of Violence

“Owowowowow...! Hey, why do you only raise your claws against me!? We’ve lived under the same roof for almost a year by now. Isn’t it about time we reached some sort of understanding?”

One afternoon after lunch, Aqua had been bothering a napping Chomusuke on the sofa and earned herself a painful scratch on her fingers.

Chomusuke has always been full of mysteries, but recently she’s been gaining more and more human-like traits.

Specifically, she’s been demanding baths more adamantly and refusing to eat stuff like raw fish, leftovers or pet food.

“Ah! Stop right there! How dare you touch my biscuits! I hope you’re prepared for the consequence of stealing a goddess’ offerings!”

Case in point, she’s now stealing snacks from Aqua.

“This cat must really hate you. Even I’ve been getting along well with it. I often wake up from naps to it sleeping on my belly.”

“And why does that happen? Is it because the two of you are evil spirits, so that’s why you two get along so well? Cats symbolize laziness, right? Could it be attracted to the epitome of laziness?”

I can’t believe she has the gall to say that when she’s just as lazy as me.

As she spoke, Chomusuke, who was laying on top of the plate of biscuits, suddenly turned to stare sharply at Aqua.

“Oh, what’s this? Seems like you’re getting stared down right now. Let me translate her catspeak for you. ‘While cats do seem to symbolize laziness, their true duty is to bring happiness to people in a lazy way-nya. You have the least say out of anyone on the topic of laziness-nya. From now on, you should stop calling yourself the Goddess of Water and start calling yourself the Goddess of Sloth-nya.’”

“You’re pretty brave to say that to my face! I will have to teach you and that arrogant ‘nya nya nya’ furball a lesson today!”

Seeing the Goddess of Violence charge forth, I picked up Chomusuke and backed off from her.

“In addition to sloth, why not list violence under your name too huh, you mad goddess!? Get rid of that irritable attitude right— Oh? What is it? Do you have something to say?”

Hearing my words, Chomusuke’s ears trembled slightly and she started nibbling my fingertip as if in protest.

Being half of the embodiment of sloth, it probably doesn’t like being taken away on a whim.

“Hey, Aqua, I wanna ask you something. Do you goddesses grow? Or in other words, say you lose more than half of your power, how would you go about replenishing it?”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s obviously faith-based. The power of goddesses comes from their beloved followers. By the way, even goddesses grow too, you know? I’ve only stopped growing because my beauty and power are both maxed out.”

Where does this girl get her confidence from?

Though, I’ve heard something nice.

Gaining faith will speed up the process.

“...O goddess, hallowed be thy name...”

“Wait a minute, why are you suddenly praying to a cat? If you wanna pray, do it to me.”

As I clasped my hands and prayed to Chomusuke on the sofa in hopes of letting it regain its power sooner, Aqua tugged on my shirt.

At that moment,

“Oh, have my honest prayers been answered?”

“... .. This thing... What does it find so attractive about Kazuma?”

Chomusuke tentatively patted my knee as I prostrated on the carpet, then dashed onto my thighs and balled up.

To willingly run to me, could this thing really be attracted to some kind of lazy aura like Aqua said?

Though, since it still recognizes Megumin as its owner, I have my doubts...

Then,

“I’m back.”

Megumin’s voice came from the front door.

Having done her daily explosion with Darkness, Megumin seemed completely drained as she flopped on top of the sofa.

When Megumin saw Chomusuke resting on my lap, she—

“Wuah, how could my familiar be sleeping in such a place without any consideration for its master who’s busy outside!? It’s been getting way too picky about food recently too. A willful demon like that deserves punishment!”

“Nyaaargh!”

—Swiftly grabbed Chomusuke and started playing with it.

Kicking around in retaliation, Chomusuke’s face was pulled into all sorts of funny expressions...

Ah, so that’s how it is.

This goddess embodies more aspects than just sloth, right...

“...? What is it, Kazuma? Why do you keep staring at my face like that?”

Megumin cocked her head and asked as she continued to play with Chomusuke.

“Sa-Say, Megumin, could you also let me hold Chomusuke?”

“I refuse. If you really want to touch this furball that badly, then go clean the bathroom in my stead today.”

“Ahhhh, how unreasonable!”

Lying on the sofa, Megumin showed an arrogant attitude fitting for the master of the violent, black furball.



really shouldn't be doing
that sort of thing in public.

Wait, that was, how should I put
it, it got to my head...



Even so, what the hell
are you thinking, doing
that sort of thing in
front of a child!?

T-T-That's-, er, it's not entirely wrong, but-!



Just to make it clear, I was a
victim there.

Y-Y-You little...!



Hmm? Hey, Kazuma, something
weird is going on in town.

The town is always weird. Though,
Wiz seems to be in quite a panic...



Aqua-sama!
Please help me!

**COMING
SOON!!**

この素晴らしい
世界に祝福を! 13



AFTERWORD

*DARKNESS REALLY ACTED
LIKE A MAIDEN THIS TIME...!!*

IT REALLY MADE MY HEART THROB.

HANG IN THERE, LALATINA!!

